Comfort through Clothing

North American women's relationship with clothing through the lens of culture.

Kara Tullman

Master of Applied Cultural Analysis

Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences
TKAM02 - Spring 2023

Supervisor

Katarzyna Herd

Abstract

Comfort through Clothing: North American Women's Relationship with Clothing Through the
      Lens of Culture

Kara Tullman

Through ethnographic analysis, this thesis investigates the ways in which North American women seek and experience different modes of comfort through their clothing. The material is drawn from a market research study that employs qualitative methods with a spectrum of women across the United States and Canada. Framed by Bourdieu's practice theory and Latour's actor-network theory, the text problematizes how the structure of a pre-determined habitus can be revealed through women's clothing choices. It highlights the contradictory messages that North American society pushes out to women, and the resulting contradictions of women's desires and actions that are reflected in their clothing. The analysis suggests that modes of comfort can be organized into four thematic groups: spatial, communal, culturally appropriate, and true. These types of comfort can be used as cultural capital in exchange for power and social mobility. The study outlines how women navigate social life through clothing and attempt to stretch the boundaries of a systematic habitus, but ultimately make choices that keep them within it.

Keywords: comfort; clothing; material culture; habitus; cultural capital; North American women; female consumers; Bourdieu; market research, emotions.

Acknowledgments

I would like to pay a special thanks to my supervisor, Katarzyna Herd, who has pushed my thinking and guided me in a topical and theoretical direction. From putting up with multiple changes to inviting me to her home for dinner, she has given undivided support throughout this process.

Thank you also to my friends, family, roommate, and partner, who have listened to me complain about this thesis on a weekly basis. Thank you to the [redacted] market research agency for choosing me to work on this exciting project. Finally, thank you to my classmates and professors who have inspired my Americanized self to slow down and value exploratory thought for the sake of it and have given me a new appreciation for academia.

Table of Contents

Objective

<div align="right">

So tell me about your outfit.
Oh this? I just kind of threw it together.
(Interview, August 2022, New York)

</div>

What an ironic use of phrasing, for as a student of cultural analysis, it is my job to question how the *throwntogetherness*, or entanglement, of everyday objects, people, feelings, sensibilities, and activities are assembled to produce a particular experience (Löfgren, 2015). The above quote is taken from an interview I conducted for a fashion brand in the summer of 2022 that provides the ethnographic material for this thesis. The results of the study provided the client with an understanding of which product features are most desired and which clothing needs remain unmet for North American women[1]. Ethnography has become an established way for marketing teams to understand their consumers in the United States. Over the past two decades, many Fortune 500 companies have invested in anthropologists and added qualitative consumer research as a standard offering from their research teams (Sunderland, 2007). Obtaining insight into the thoughts of the everyday consumer is imperative for proper product direction and many marketing executives preach the idea that everything is intel, from the book your neighbor reads on the subway to the interaction between customer and clerk at the corner store.

As much as the interviews in this study informed product strategy for a particular brand, they also act as an incredible landscape for analyzing culture. In their book, Biographical Objects, Janet Hoskins states, "In studying a society so deeply steeped in exchange, a 'person-centered' ethnography has to be rethought as one that uses objects as metaphors to elicit an indirect account of personal experience" (Hoskins, 1998, p.2). The way the women interviewed for this study speak about their clothing gives insight into their desires, attitudes, and experiences in society. Their relationship to clothing says more about their place in the world than about the types of product features they are missing. I pondered how this research study could be used for a deeper analysis into North American women in general. During the study, the client mentioned that respondents often pointed to the way clothing makes them feel when they don't have the

---

[1] For the purposes of this text, the term 'North American women' reflects the sample of 64 women represented in the research study. This includes women from 7 U.S. markets (East, Central, West) and 2 Canadian markets (Toronto, Vancouver.) A further breakdown of demographics is included on page 12.

technical product language in their vocabulary. As such, when asked why she likes a zip-up hoodie, a woman will describe a feeling of 'breathability' rather than name an adjustable zipper. With this in mind, I focused in on the feel-states that women recounted when describing their experiences with clothing.

The aim of this thesis is to problematize the different ways women understand comfort in order to open a wider discussion about their place in society. While there was a spectrum of emotions brought up, the term comfort was by far the most common feeling women looked for through their clothing. A term that may have seemed obvious in conversation became curious upon further reflection. Women were looking for comfort in social settings, at work, with their partners, in their homes; comfort started to take on a multilayered definition that continuously transformed its meaning. Furthermore, motivations behind constant comfort-seeking provided a window into the societal narrative of my participants. By exploring how women navigate clothing choices, I aim to innovate how brands can uncover a deeper consumer story by asking the following questions of the study participants:

1. How do informants utilize their clothing to experience modes of comfort?
2. What do these different uses tell us about the societal narrative in which they are placed?

Background

North America is specifically an intriguing region to study women and clothing. As opposed to more homogeneous nations, the melting pot of North American residents introduces transnational influences and a mix of historical relationships to clothing and fashion. As a country known for its material consumption and mass production of popular culture, it can be argued that the U.S. is a global hub for fashion trends and brand headquarters. However, it's a *uniquely* interesting time to study clothes in North America for a few reasons:

1. Post-pandemic fashion

The rules of fashion and what is deemed socially 'acceptable' have changed due to the Covid19 pandemic. Locked at home during the height of the virus, people were let into the previously private world of their coworkers via Zoom, peering in at their screaming children, messy homes, and 'groutfits'. With the emotional weight of Covid19, maintaining appearance felt like the least of people's worries. Most societies have now gotten to a place where public interaction is safe

and back to the norm, but many people are emerging with different attitudes towards clothing and are placing a larger emphasis on comfort (Online community, August 2022). Gone are the days of checking the dress code before entering a restaurant (as that restaurant is likely just happy to have kept afloat.) Covid19 lockdown additionally removed the separation of public and private space where there was no longer a designated space for the private self. The clarity of compartmentalized identities and their associated dress codes became blurred as the space to perform all identities (professional, social, family, etc.) merged into one. This confusion has been further emphasized through the popularization of blended and multipurpose spaces. A prime example is the rock-climbing gym Vital[2] that doubles as a co-working space, where the place of leisure and labor become one.

2. *Social Media*

Social media apps like Instagram and TikTok have led to a new universal access to fashion. TikTok's website boasts this sentiment, stating "Welcome to Fashion on TikTok: where everyone not only has a front row seat on the runway, but also the opportunity to direct the show." TikTok has changed the power dynamic between fashion houses and consumers, giving an opportunity for the everyday user to co-create trends. This was especially prevalent as a result of Covid19, when businesses paused and the digital creator economy boomed. Young consumers are no longer relying solely on brands or celebrities for fashion advice but are turning to see what is trending from their peers online. Additionally, social media has heightened the speed at which information is passed, leading to a warped sense of time and a severely shortened fashion trend cycle. The hyper niche communities on 'FashionTok' have created a myriad of microtrends, such as 'cottage-core' and 'dark-academia.' Social media has provided a view of different cultures and ways of dressing, opening a window for collaborative creativity. While there have been earlier studies on the impact of social media on fashion (Sayani & Prakriti 2021, Ahmad 2015) there is little research on these effects during and post-Covid era.

3. *Sustainability*

With the impending climate crisis, the issue of sustainable fashion has made its way to the forefront of fashion discourse in North America. Over the past decade, news outlets and

---

[2] https://www.vitalclimbinggym.com/

documentaries have revealed the negative effects of the fast fashion market, polluting the environment and promoting poor worker conditions. Consumers are more aware of business practices and the environmental impact of their purchases. A recent study of 1,000 U.S. adults concluded that two-thirds of respondents are willing to pay more for sustainable products (Sustainable Brands, 2022). There has been a rise of 'slow fashion' brands using recycled materials, promising fair-trade sourcing and a responsible supply chain process. Fashion brands have quickly had to accommodate for new consumer expectations, especially in the U.S. which is the capital of cancel culture (Pew Research Center, 2021) where consumers are quick to 'break up' with a brand. There is a new feeling of consumer responsibility in relation to their clothing purchases that has not been prevalent in previous years.

The factors above add to the messiness of these women's relationships towards clothing and thus provide a fitting backdrop to study their place in culture.

Thesis Outline

The introduction of this thesis consists of the above background, previous research, methods and material, and a theoretical disposition. I begin with a section on previous research to demonstrate relevant research in the field, construct my own place within it, and differentiate what my contribution will be. I then move on to the theoretical framework, grounding in Bourdieu's practice theory and Latour's actor network theory. The analysis portion uses these theorists, in addition to others in the cultural realm, to problematize the types of comfort North American women look for through clothing. It is organized into four chapters: spatial comfort, communal comfort, culturally appropriate comfort, and true comfort. Finally, the text concludes with a discussion on findings, and what kind of story the analysis has depicted of a North American woman. I then offer suggestions for applicability and further research.

Previous Research

The construction of my field lies at the intersection of clothing research, consumer storytelling, and North American women. There are hundreds of texts produced about clothing, dress, and adornment from multiple angles, however, I narrowed my literature to focus on the relationship between clothing and the self. Marketing researcher Russell Belk writes about the

important integration of possessions and human identities. He creates the notion of an 'extended self' which is "not to be limited to external objects and personal possessions, but also includes persons, places, and group possessions as well as such possessions as body parts and vital organs" (Belk, 1988, p.140). This text explains how an object becomes part of a person's identity, and therefore argues that a person can never truly be separated from their possessions. Social psychology explores how dress can play a role in answering fundamental questions about the self, such as 'what type of person am I?' Johnson et.al. review research projects that test the impact of dress in expressing one's 'true self,' reviewing and making assumptions of others, and creating an image of the self and one's environment. One study on women's attitudes toward clothing reveals that women have an ongoing and dynamic relationship with clothing that allows them to realize certain aspects of themselves (Johnson et.al., 2014). It is this intertwined relationship that I intend to explore further in my analysis.

Author John Harvey discusses the many meanings behind clothing, showing the ways in which clothes can be "historical, theoretical, social, psychological, material, and aesthetic" (Harvey, 2008, p.24). He makes a point that authors who write about clothes also are wearers themselves, recognizing that no one is exempt from the issue, and choosing clothes is a part of life. Like Johnson et.al, Harvey shows how clothing adds to a sense of self, but he emphasizes the aspect of an audience as a key factor. Drawing from sociologist Erving Goffman, Harvey argues that clothes are something we physically put on, but at the same time, the wearer puts on a performance through their clothes. His chapter on fashion introduces the paradox of clothing for individual style on a mass-produced scale, and the ability for changes in fashion to make way for larger societal changes. Harvey's text demonstrates the immense influence clothing has on daily human behavior and emotions, and society at large.

There has been extensive research on the semiotics of clothing, how clothes convey a message, and their contribution to the social construct of power. Multimodal scholar Yuet Owyong gives a historical account of clothing motivations, beginning with clothing as protection from the elements, moving to a way to showcase modesty, and finally into an art form through fashion. She describes clothing's ability to denote power relations through the use of uniforms, giving examples of a doctor's coat versus a nurse's scrubs. This message is communicated through societal codes, that are shared among the wearer and the 'reader' of the clothing as semiotic text. Owyong recognizes that while clothing has an immense power to communicate,

people do not always use it with the intention to convey a pre-determined message, giving the example of hand-me-downs. However, "different articles of clothing do convey different messages, so regardless of the intentions, motivations and level of awareness of the wearer, his clothes will send a certain message to the observer" (Owyong, 2009, p.195). While this statement is valid, I believe further investigation behind the intentions and motivations of the wearer is necessary to illuminate important pieces of the consumer story. The authors in clothing research succeed in emphasizing the importance of dress, but do not take the additional step to how this information is particularly relevant for a brand.

The next section of previous research focuses on the importance of telling a consumer story. "Creating and telling stories is the most universal of human activities" (Wacker, 2008, p.10). Writers in brand storytelling argue that what separates a good brand from a great brand is the nuances of their consumer story and the way it is told. Stories are essential to building consumer connections because humans process information as a narrative. People create stories to organize their experiences, create order, explain unusual events, gain perspective, and make evaluations (Bruno, 1990 as cited in Escalas, 2004, p.168). Narratives fit the pieces of people's lives together with causal links: stories elucidate goals, evaluate actions to achieve goals, and interpret outcomes (Pennington & Hastie, 1986 as cited in Escalas, 2004, p.168). This idea is enhanced in the book Biographical Objects, which recounts the ways objects are woven into the stories people tell about their lives (Hoskins, 1998).

During my time at the consultancy, my coworkers consistently mentioned to the 'story', referring to the narrative picture that we would ultimately paint of the consumer. While the job of the ethnographer is to collect qualitative data, market researchers are required to take this a step further and craft a consumer story that the client can use. Smith and Winthrob have studied brand storytelling as a framework for business activation and discuss the co-creation of storytelling. They argue that a good brand story is told when the ideas promoted by a brand are owned by the consumers. They also recognize that there are different types of stories a brand can tell which is both empowering to the brand and makes it more engaging for their consumers (Smith & Winthrob, 2013). This thesis builds on their work by expanding the scope of the traditional consumer narrative, shifting from a well-crafted story into a navigation of relations with society and the self.

While there is plenty of academic research on North American women, the most impactful text in my opinion comes from popular media. Women are told to be the best, but not be too boastful, to put in 100 percent effort but also to practice self-care. They should be body confident, but also food conscious, and hide their wrinkles without wearing too much makeup. Celebrities in media have recently sparked conversations on contradictory expectations placed upon women in the workplace. Nicki Minaj, a popular female rapper, expressed her thoughts on women's positioning:

> When I'm assertive, I'm a bitch. When a man is assertive, he's a boss. But when you're a girl, you have to be, like, everything. You have to be dope at what you do, but you have to be super sweet and you have to be sexy… and you have to be this and you have to be that and you have to be nice it's like… I can't be all those things at once. I'm a human being! (Nikki Minaj as cited in Jenkins, 2019)

After the globalization of the Me Too movement in 2017, brands with female audiences started responding to this unrealistic pressure. Clothing companies like Knix and YouSwim are leaning into body neutrality and acceptance with slogans like "self-acceptance is always a good look." However, in their book Brandsplaining, Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts discuss how marketing messages are still very much sexist, but brands have learned how to do it more covertly. "Brands appear to be presenting a more positive and progressive message for women, but in reality, all that's happened is a trick of the language. Age-defying has turned into 'ageless' and dieting has coded itself as 'wellness'" (Cunningham, 2021, p.27). A study comparing the portrayal of women in advertising as compared to men argues that despite the progress made to reduce type casted roles, women's bodies are still subjected to scrutiny in campaigns far more than men's (Sharma & Bumb, 2021). Whether to promote natural bodies, smooth bodies, curvy bodies, or sexy bodies, the object of advertising remains that of a woman's body.

Figure to the right: Compilation of advertisements from 2012 to 2023.

This thesis will connect the dots between the three fields above to show how the consumer narrative of North American women is revealed through their motivations behind clothing choices.

Methods & Material

Empirical Material

I carried out my primary research in October 2022 working for a cultural strategy agency in New York City. In the initial stages of the study, I worked with a senior research lead as a team of two assigned to a specific client. The client in question was a global athleisure brand that was trying to understand the unmet daily clothing needs of North American women to guide their upcoming product strategy. The client recognized that their customers' lives had changed significantly since the pandemic, and rightfully assumed that daily clothing needs had changed as a result. The client organization already had audience groupings established, with specific demographics and buyer habits for each. These groups were primarily organized by purchase history and consumption level of brand products, categorized into high, medium, low, and zero consumption. It was my job to gather insights for each of these audience groups and find the daily clothing needs within each of these groups, in addition to general clothing needs that were present across all groups.

To achieve this goal, I conducted compositional ethnography, splicing together observations, conversations, images, video, and sensory data from digital and physical material to produce an analysis. 'Composing' ethnography as a sort of montage, rather than simply writing it, encourages malleability of the field and offers the ethnographer new form, perspective, and potential (O'Dell & Willim, 2011). As human needs must be seen in their relevant cultural context in order to be correctly interpreted (Graffman & Börjesson, 2011) I conducted a trends analysis of North American women to ground myself in the cultural landscape as an initial fieldwork phase. This was done via netnography, scanning social media and popular culture, and surveying competitor brand websites. Next, using a third-party agent that tapped into existing social networks, the team and I recruited an online community made up of 64 women from 9 geographical markets in North America. The participants consisted of

women aged 18-55, with varied careers, life stages, family types, and interests. Women were asked to document their clothing choices, the times they changed, and their corresponding thoughts in a daily video diary. Each day, they were given prompts to answer questions about their hobbies, identities, emotions, opinions on comfort and style, and fashion preferences.

The platform of an online community provided a landscape to access multi-modal (photos, video, text) material from multiple geographies. Participants were encouraged to like or comment on each others' posts, creating a dynamic discussion. While there has been criticism of digital ethnography as a method that accurately captures day to day rituals of participants, (Satveer Kaur-Gill, 2017), a major benefit of conducting the first part of our ethnography digitally was the platform's ability to distill data, decoding themes and keywords in a helpful way for analysis. My colleagues and I took a few weeks to analyze this material, grouping the data by themes we pulled out (such as comfort, versatility, emotion, etc.) We used these themes as a guiding point to create the questions for the next phase of research: in-depth interviews.

From the 64 online community respondents, we chose 14 engaged respondents to conduct a 2.5-hour in-home interview where the participants showed us their wardrobes and expanded upon their responses from the online community. We asked the participants to show us how their wardrobes were organized and give explanations behind their decision process. We also asked them to take out certain items of clothing, such as their 'staple' and least favorite pieces, and show us the product features they liked and disliked. In addition to learning about participants' technical product needs, we probed about their emotions toward clothing. Moving away from a strict question-and-answer format and utilizing props within their environment allowed us to stimulate less easily accessible parts of the informants' minds. We captured these at-home visits on camera and recorded observations in a notebook. The advantages of observation, interview, and go-along methods were strengthened when pursued together and offered an opportunity to co-create an ethnographic field with our participants (Kusenbach, 2003).

In the end, we had hundreds of pages of material and immersed ourselves in the lives of these participants. I worked with this material for several months to produce a report for the client that was focused on the daily clothing needs of their customers. In creating my own analysis for the purpose of this thesis, I needed to once again 'make the familiar strange.' It was imperative to apply a critical distance from the material and analyze it through asking naïve or obvious questions (Löfgren, 2015) to gain new insights from it. As my conclusion involves an

evaluation of research methods, I also employed a critical examination of the client by recording my own field notes to use as additional material.

Scope, Limitations and Benefits of the Material and Methodology

Much effort was put into choosing informants to have a diverse and broad population of viewpoints, and while the informants cover a broad range of North American representation, the scope of this work is limited. Since the study was for an athletic retail client, the informants that were picked are all physically active in some capacity (the study however did not focus only on athletic/athleisure clothes, but rather the informants' wardrobes as a whole). While the informants are diverse in ethnicity and financial income, I must acknowledge that they all have the privilege of clothing choice, and that this thesis is not relevant for those populations where choice is not possible. We chose to have all women-identifying participants based on the makeup of this client's customers. It is also important to recognize the role of gender in the study. When referring to women, I am referring to my informants that have self-identified as a woman.

This research was a joint effort between the agency and the client. The collaboration between the two parties created space for additional points of view and creativity but also narrowed the window in which we could work. Our main point of contact for the client was a market researcher herself, with very specific objectives and goals for this project. Her role within her organization was to deliver fresh market insights to the product team, and therefore her thought process and participant questioning were often product focused. When the research and analysis veered too far from product into a different realm, she would reign it back in. This proved to be a bit challenging for my colleague and me, as it limited our ability to expand upon interesting topics that came up (such as dirt, geographical considerations, memory, etc.)

We faced an additional challenge when landing on a research question. Having product success by solving unmet needs in the clothing space previously, the client's hope was to go out into the field and find new unmet needs to solve for. The problem was, how do you create a research question when you do not know what you're looking for? In the initial research phase, the research question was not straightforward and oscillated between 'how do women define versatility and comfort' and 'what are women's daily clothing needs?' Although we eventually landed on the latter, our focus was constantly being redirected by the clients. Therefore, the fieldwork and initial analysis were limited by the constraints of the client, proving Sunderland's

point that doing research for an agency, corporate cultural analysts are at the will of the client (Sunderland, 2007). While we as researchers had input into the methodology, the client had the ultimate sign-off, creating a delicate client/researcher relationship.

That being said, working with or for a client can also have major benefits in research. Gaining access to helpful participants is an issue that ethnographers often face in independent research (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012). Finding diverse, engaged participant pools can be time consuming and challenging. Agencies have the budget to work with recruiting companies that have the time and resources to conduct a thorough participant search. Researchers backed by the legitimacy of an agency may have an easier time using more 'invasive' ethnographic methods such as home visits and activities than an independent researcher. Participants that are unfamiliar with research practices might be more willing to trust an agency with proven experience and organized privacy policies. Lastly, the agency atmosphere is often collaborative and fosters team input during the analysis and an opportunity to have the material viewed from multiple vantage points.

I also should mention my situated position in the field as a researcher and how it affects the material and its analysis. We made ourselves known as researchers, taking notes, using a camera and recorder, and of course, asking questions. Playing the recordings back, it feels a bit cringy to watch our attempt at building rapport with the participant. Asking questions about their week, and complimenting them on their homes, it is obvious to me that the participants don't want to engage in pleasantry conversation and would like to get to the point. It is impossible for the researcher to take themself out of the field; we bring personal expectations and ideals from our own lives into the research field (Landén, 2011). As the author of this thesis, I produce the material from my position as an American millennial woman belonging to correlating communities, and an analysis is created with that situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

Lastly, the material gathered was originally intended for a very different purpose other than how I am using it. I am analyzing it through the lens of cultural theory as a means to problematize North American women. Due to ethical considerations, I have not included pictures or videos of my informants. Beverly Skeggs points out that "during [her] research, [she] is continuously aware of the ease with which those researched can be constructed as objects of knowledge without agency or volition" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 19). While the informants of this study are aware that research is taking place and have signed consent forms, they are not privy to the

way in which they might be perceived and the final product of this research. Therefore, I have anonymized all names and have left out any visual data that was obtained. I also would like to make a general note that to conduct cultural analysis there is a need to assert comparative generalizations (Miller, 2010). This thesis analyzes a specific subset of women, and as such is not meant to encompass the experience of every woman that fits the demographic.

Theoretical Framework

This text is primarily inspired by two overarching theories that are rooted in issues of agency and structure. First is Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory and the second is Bruno Latour's actor network theory. These theories open the possibility to examine external forces at play in the world of my participants and problematize how these forces influence their search for comfort. To bring these classic into a modern context, I lean on Beverly Skeggs and Jane Bennett as interpreters of these theories to help push them in new directions.

Bourdieu looks at the social world as a "representation or a performance, and practices as the acting-out of roles, [where] objects of knowledge are constructed. The principle of this construction is the system of structured dispositions, or *habitus*, which is constituted in practice and oriented toward practical functions" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.52). In Bourdieu's view, all of social life can be seen as a game comprised of three components: the field, habitus, and cultural capital. The field is the space of social interaction, where the societal system plays out. Each field, or system of social order, has its own specific logic that is created through exchanges of cultural and symbolic capital. Like economic capital, cultural capital involves a circulation of immaterial and material goods that increase status and lead to power. Patterns in the exchange of symbolic capital over time are what create societal power relations and a determined social order, or habitus, for different social groups. While cultural capital can be used to move between social classes, Bourdieu believes that individuals and collectives live in accordance with their pre-determined habitus through unconscious practices. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is traditionally used to examine class relations, however, that is not the focus of this thesis. I will use practice theory to show how my participants use clothing as a form of cultural capital to negotiate their habitus.

Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs take Bourdieu's practice theory and apply it to contemporary feminist theory (Adkins & Skeggs, 2005). They use the notion of habitus to stress the importance of acknowledging historical conditions that are unconsciously reproduced and perpetuate rigid perspectives of femininity. However, Skeggs does not agree with Bourdieu completely; she believes that by ignoring things that do not fit into habitus, that Bourdieu is ignoring a significant amount of social life and not leaving room for ambiguity. While she agrees that femininity is a product of habitus, Skeggs believes that women use play and performance to constantly transform the definition of the female they embody. Her text acknowledges the resistance to habitus that many actors in feminism exhibit (Skeggs, 2004). I will demonstrate both the classical Bordieuan view and Skeggs' feminist view, as I show how women navigate their predetermined habitus while attempting to expand it.

The second theory that grounds this text is Latour's post-humanist actor network theory (ANT), which recognizes the plethora of nonhuman and human elements that interact to make any desired state. Latour's theory brings light to the web of relations that exists behind all actors. This web has also been described as an 'assemblage' by philosopher Jane Bennett, who puts Latour in conversation with Spinoza, Adorno, and Deleuze. "An assemblage is made up of imaginative contingent articulations among myriad heterogeneous elements" (Bennett 2010, p.23). With this definition, Bennett gives agency to objects, or things, which she calls 'thing-power materialism.' The concept does not suggest that all objects have equal agency, but rather that human and nonhuman actors alike work together to give shape to a state of being. I will use Bennett's definition of thing-power to examine the relational actants that influence my participants' attitudes towards clothing. In ANT, human intention may compete with other forces within the matter; I use this concept to question what agency women actually have over their clothing choices.

These two theories I have chosen are stronger when they work in tandem. Actants with a network are arranged, exchanged, and reordered to fit into a fixed habitus. Inspired by the conjunction of these theories, I use them as a frame to critically reflect upon how North American women use clothing as a form of cultural capital to seek comfort within their environment. As a note, performance theory has been considered as a theoretical viewpoint, but that is not the scope of this thesis.

Chapter 1 - Spatial Comfort

In the 1920s, global advertising revealed a new type of woman, a 'modern woman.' Embodied as the American flapper, the French Garconne, the Japanese Moga or the German Neue Frauthe, the modern woman was an international representation of what a woman should look like (Tichnor, 2006). Thin eyes, a bold red lip, slender figure, and most importantly pale porcelain skin. 100 years later, while aesthetic standards have changed and models are showing more inclusive body types, fashion advertising still dictates a trending look that is subject to change at any point. This look often marks the approval or disapproval of specific body types and races. "The declaration of butts being over is also the declaration that using Blackness as an aesthetic is over in the fashion industry: whiteness and ultra-thinness are back in style. The question is, why are body types still a trend" (Pitcher, 2022)? With body trends oscillating between the Kardashian-inspired hourglass figure and 'heroin-chic,' it is impossible for women to fit an everchanging standard.

The participants in my study are part of a network of actants that work to constantly remind them of the confined spaces they should live within, Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus.* This web of actants can encompass everything from language usage and visual symbols to public policy and environmental design. Modern American society is laden with misogynistic and racist messages[3] shaping a particular habitus that American females inhabit. In different ways, each of these women uses clothing to be able to safely move through their space, what I define as **spatial comfort.** In earlier studies of clothing in the 1920s, scholars focused on women's motivations for wearing clothes, such as to preserve their modesty, accentuate their sex appeal, and to protect themselves from the elements (Rubinstein, 1995). I will examine the modern development of these motivations by analyzing the different ways women seek to place their bodies in spatial comfort as a response to actants in their environment.

As a preface to comprehend what I mean by spatial comfort, I will introduce Lefebvre's production of space. According to Lefebvre, space does not just encompass the milieu in which we live our lives but is an interlinkage of geographic form, built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life (Lefebvre, 1991, as cited in Molotch 1993, p.888). There are three

---

[3] For further reading on hidden sexist symbols, I can recommend Are We Still a Sexist Society? Primary Socialization and Adherence to Gender Roles in Childhood. For further reading on racist symbols, I suggest Racism in the English Language.

types of space in Lefebvre's triad: the physical space itself, discursive space (how the space is perceived), and representational space (how the space is experienced) (Lefebvre, 1991). Through their relationship with clothing, women play with all three types in order to produce comfort within their environment. Nigel Thrift commented on relations between bodies and spaces:

> The space of the body consists of a series of leaves, each which contains the relations of the body to things and each of which is more or less related to other spaces. (Thrift, 2000, p.36)

This quote demonstrates how Lefebvre's notion of space speaks to actor network theory. The different actants that the body encounters, and the body as an actant itself, produce a particular space that is lived and experienced. The body practices of my participants are often unconscious, as is their creation of spatial comfort. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how three women, Nell, Gianna, and Kaitlin, construct space through a network of actants: their bodies, their clothing, and American beauty standards. Furthermore, each of the women above employs particular strategies of dress to harness this space into one they feel comfortable living in.

A spectrum of visibility

In this section, I will discuss how three of my informants respond to body appearance and race by finding spatial comfort in clothes that give them desired levels of visibility. Nell is a 34-year-old Black woman living in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Her wardrobe consists of many neutral-colored sweatshirts, oversized sweatpants, and 'cozy' items including beanies and blankets. Showing one of her hoodies, she says "I like how this looks. This cowl neck, I guess it's called or whatever. I like that. I can do this [zips up neckline over her face]. Because you're hiding everything but your eyes and that's a ninja" (Interview, August 2022, New York). When probed to explain what she means by a ninja, she goes on to describe their shielding and secretive qualities; how ninjas use clothing to conceal their identity. The ninja figure in popular culture is a Japanese secret spy that used camouflaged clothing to conduct a mission undetected and with stealth.

Arguably, Nell uses her clothing to camouflage her existence as a Black female in America. The interaction of her race, size, and gender here creates an intersectional experience greater than the sum of racism and sexism. Nell's position is grounded in experiences that

"actually represent a subset of a much more complex phenomenon" (Crenshaw,1989, p. 140). The discourse around inclusive representation has exploded among American clothing brands, especially after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Diversity and inclusivity have become a table-stake for consumer consideration. Realistic models varying in age, size, ethnicity, and ability are not limited to a few progressive brands like Glossier and Aerie but are now becoming commonplace. However, just because brands are starting to get the inclusivity memo does not erase or negate the experience that marginalized women like Nell have had with clothing up to this point. There have been numerous texts and new media on the appropriation of Black bodies for white fashion[4], detailing body trends rooted in race, and unequal standards set upon Black women. Her skin color and body are subjects of societal discussion; to remain invisible to that discourse, she must hide behind cloth. It can be inferred that Nell uses her clothing's protective qualities as a way to shield herself from the harmful and complicated discourse around clothing for women that look like she does. By covering herself with clothing, Nell takes her body out of the equation, reducing the opportunity to be viewed and ridiculed. During our interview, she takes out her favorite sweatshirt to lounge around in.

> It feels like something is hugging you, if you're sad. It just feels like something is there comforting you. I feel like my clothes [are] a barrier. It feels like [they are] protecting me. And, like, when you feel sad and you have something like that, it envelops you. (Interview, August 2022, New York)

The room gets quiet for a minute - it seems that Nell surprises herself with that statement and the weight behind it. In popular culture and clothing semiotics, clothes are often stated to express us externally, helping people bring something inside, outside (Harvey, 2008). However, in Nell's case, she is using the clothes to work for her internally. Through deep questioning, Nell exemplifies Daniel Miller's position on the influence of invisible objects; the less we are aware of them, the more powerful they become (Miller, 2010). As an extension of herself, Nell's clothes become a tool to showcase who she is and where she stands in her social setting (Belk, 2009). After a moment or so, she speaks of not wanting to stand out on the street where men can cat-call. Covering her body in bigger and less objectively sexual clothing makes her invisible to

---

[4] For further reading, I suggest starting with Soul Thieves: White America and the Appropriation of Hip Hop and Black Culture.

the male onlooker and allows her to move through her space in a safe way. As objects with agency of their own, Nell's clothing acts as a safety barrier around her body that protects both her external and internal space.

The interesting thing is there is nothing unusual about Nell's appearance; as a woman of color over a size zero, she represents a huge chunk of the American population. Yet, she expresses a need to hide as if her body is out of the ordinary. This leads me to question the habitus in which Nell finds herself trapped. Perhaps it is not an existing habitus she lives in, but the *projected* habitus of a Black American female, one that she believes she is supposed fit. In her essay on taking up space as a Black woman, Amari Pollard states, "To be a Black woman in America is hyper-visible and invisible at the same time" (Pollard, 2020). Recognized and ridiculed for prominent features, different hair, and dark skin, Black women in America are taught to hide anything that challenges Western Eurocentric values. The embodied entitlement to space (physical and aural) is often a statement of social entitlement (Skeggs, 2004, p.20). It is not a surprise that Nell does not dare to act entitled in a social space that has historically and systematically minimized women like her. Afraid to take up too much space, Nell keeps herself in a stereotyped habitus.

Another one of my participants, Kaitlin, is a 32-year-old Asian American woman, and has a similar disposition as Nell; she is a minority American woman with pock marks on her skin from acne. Her reaction to her socialized position is akin to Nell's, but her emotions oscillate back and forth between wanting to hide through clothing and wanting to rebel through clothing. On one hand, she expresses disregard for fitting within societal lines.

> You cannot wear [it] that way, especially as an Asian woman. So right now, I just choose who I am. I want to be comfortable. I don't care if I have marks. People told me you shouldn't wear that or you should use this cream and like know how. But no, I just want to focus on being me and doing my activities, which is more important than just, I mean, looks. (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles)

This statement exhibits the rebellious attitude that is exemplary of the cultural conversation around female body acceptance and women speaking out about the unhealthy pressures put on their appearance. The late 2010s and onward has seen a strong backlash to rigid female beauty standards. Messages of body positivity and neutrality have skyrocketed in popular culture and propelled by social media, have actively integrated into mainstream discourse (two examples

being plus-size TikToker Remi Bader's comments[5] about poor body representation to New York Fashion Week and singer-songwriter Jax's song that slams Victoria Secret). On the other hand, Kaitlin speaks of clothing that can only be worn when her body is leaning more toward societal beauty standards. "[I will wear this] when I'm feeling confident about myself. I will definitely wear this like when I lose half a pound or so" (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles).

Kaitlin's second statement demonstrates a historical theme that women are better if there is less of them. The irony comes when comparing traditionally[6] female and male clothing options. Women have a plethora of clothing choices in comparison to men, and yet so often they are told they wear clothes in the wrong way. In a sea of similar-looking slacks and ties, one would think that it would be easier to spot an outfit faux pas on a male. However, women are called out for being 'too much' or going overboard with an outfit far more than their male counterparts[7]. Connell suggests that while bodies are generally a source of power for men, they are a source of anxiety and tentativeness for women (Connell, 1995). Though significant progress has been made over the last century when it comes to women's rights, they are still a product of overarching social practices. Subtle gendered body practices and proper presentation are taught from a young age (Martin, 1998) and are perpetuated through workplace policies[8] and low representation in positions of leadership.

Kaitlin is caught between rebelling against these practices and complying with them. In her first statement, she views her clothing's purpose not as aesthetic but functional - they should not act as a distraction from her focus. With this viewpoint, she creates a space of perceived confidence in herself to regain power back from her societal typecast [9]. Here, she claims and embodies space that has historically been taken away from her. In the second statement, she hands power over to a classified system of American beauty standards. According to Skeggs, resistance only occurs with parties that are invested in the game of power (Skeggs, 2005). Kaitlin

---

[5] https://stylecaster.com/remi-bader-nyfw/

[6] I am speaking of the historically traditional binary separating men's' and women's' clothing, with the awareness that clothing is increasingly becoming gender neutral.

[7] For examples of women complaining about this on social media, see SheDoestheCity and Cristina de Lia on Medium.

[8] Women in the North American context are at higher risk to lose their job after maternity leave, and the gender pay gap has remained steady over the past two decades for mid to older generations.

[9] Asian American women have been the target of racism and sexism since the 1800s, and more recently during Covid19. For more information, start with Where Sexism and Racism Meet: The Danger of Existing as an Asian American Woman.

plays with utilizing power to construct a space of confidence and succumbing to create a space of safety, both as a mechanism to feel comfortable in her skin.

A third informant, Gianna, is a 20-year-old Hispanic American living at home with her parents in Los Angeles, California. She often dresses in workout sets, and the main staples in her wardrobe include crop tops, leggings, and bright-colored dresses. She enjoys getting attention from her clothing. "I feel I wore it one time, and I had so many compliments, so I will probably be wearing it again. I felt so good in it. I really like the color. I felt like I popped in it" (Interview, August 2022, Lost Angeles). Part of the reason Gianna wants to feel seen is that she takes pride in her body and uses her clothing to express this. "I'm like proud of my body. So I want to wear clothes that show off my figure." Her sentiment echoes the praise that stars like Adele and Rebel Wilson have gotten for their weight loss in the media. Gianna is white-passing and objectively meets North American beauty standards as of late - a recent survey of 1,000 Americans describes the 'perfect' woman as 165cm, 58kg, with a 66cm waist (Hoff, 2019). Meeting these standards builds Gianna's confidence when choosing her outfit. "I could wear something that's very showy because it's my body. And people can judge me if they want to, but I don't really care."

Gianna's response to her body is on the opposite end of the spectrum as Nell - she wants to be seen and chooses clothing that helps her do so. Gianna receives positive attention and recognition from her fashion, so she attributes happiness to her clothing (Ahmed, 2016). Even still, she is not free from the confinements of her habitus. She uses her body as a form of cultural capital, exchanging the sexualized female form for social recognition and status. In a societal space that treats the female body as the object of desire (see any rap music video from the past 20 years), Gianna receives comfort from constructing a space through clothing that she recognizes in popular culture. Receiving this attention and responding to it keeps her in the exact aesthetic that her habitus expects of someone with her stature, and so the social constraints remain stuck in a reciprocal loop.

All three of the participants above exhibit ironic contradictions, where their actions do not match their words. As a big-chested Black woman, Nell rarely sees women that look like her associated with popular brands. She makes note of the lack of representation she sees in brand advertisements and wishes this were different. While she expresses a desire to be seen, she dresses to be invisible. Kaitlin states that she does not care what external pressures say about her

body or skin. At the same time, Kaitlin told us that she refuses to wear shorts, not even in front of her partner, due to her insecurity about her legs. Lastly, Gianna dresses to feel sexy and noticed. However, she also makes note that she fears showing too much skin is inappropriate. These contradicting statements exemplify the near impossibility to break out of habitus. If "the socially and environmentally contextualized body thinks along with the brain" (Scheer, 2012, p.197), then the minds of these women rebel against aesthetic homogeny while their bodies work to keep them safe within it.

Nell, Kaitlin, and Gianna create narratives of spatial comfort for themselves in the way they speak about clothing, as clothes exist as an extension of the way they wish to see themselves. Johnson et.al. identify two categories of clothing that women use for self-projection, the 'woman I want to be' and the 'woman I am most of the time' (Johnson et.al. 2014). The first category is exemplified in the language my participants use to share their desires around clothing (wanting to be recognized in fashion, wanting to rebel against social pressures, wanting to feel proud of my body) while the second category exemplifies the actual actions they take. Creating narratives of spatial comfort allows these women to tell their stories as the woman they want to be rather than the woman they are most of the time. Whether they are striving for protection (Nell), negotiation (Kaitlin), or affirmation (Gianna), living in their own habitus with marked emotions toward another is a demanding process that is hard work for all three.

Fighting with fabric

When asked during the interview about certain activewear brands, several of my non-white informants brought up race. "I've never thought [redacted brand name] was a brand for super athletic or outdoor activities. I think it caters specifically to a more affluent woman from a Caucasian race" (Interview, August 2022, New York). We also heard that many clothes in an affordable price range were not properly designed for multiple body types and different forms of movement. Women expressed frustration with sagging bottoms, constricted movement, and extra fabric. This means that Nell, Kaitlin, and Gianna often wear clothes that are not accurately designed for them. Thus, they must harness the clothes to fit their person and claim authority over them. The three women utilize uniquely individual strategies to tame the cloth beast and obtain some level of physical comfort within their embodied space.

> I call it a **boob prison** bra sometimes. I have a big bust, so sometimes it's not always the best way to go. But if I'm home, then I'm free to wear [a shirt] without it because I feel like I don't want to be constricted all the time.
> (Interview, August 2022, New York)

Nell's interview was full of quotes like the one above that demonstrated her connection between clothing and feelings of freedom and constraint. Nell's clothing has agency over her physical comfort levels that influence her emotional comfort. The design of her bra is what Bennett calls a 'mover and a shaker,' an agent that has the ability to set things in motion and move an assemblage in a certain direction (Bennett, 2016). In this context, Nell's uncomfortable and constricting bra causes a desire to be free from clothing. Situated in a society that makes it difficult for plus-sized women to find functional, fashionable, and affordable apparel (Greenleaf, 2019), Nell is only able to feel safe and free in her body within the context of her home. The poor product design of her bra leaves her feeling trapped and agitated in public settings. As is the case for many women, her clothes (and especially her bra) act as a functional yet physically uncomfortable layer that she can shed once she is back in her home. Whether it is on a conscious or unconscious level, Nell actually spends most of her time at home, working from her home office and exercising from her yoga mat; perhaps in part due to the fact that she finds a sense of relief in the physical space. Kaitlin talks about the need to move freely in her clothing:

> During exercise, sometimes if the clothes are too loose, it will snag, it will fly away. When I do like different type of movement, I need to think about it. I don't want to wear [redacted brand name] because it's very uncomfortable. It's dangerous because I might not focus on my posture or something else.
> (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles)

If not fitted correctly, Kaitlin's clothes demand attention from her, which is something she previously stated as a concern. Too loose, and the fabric will snag, but too tight and her body will constrict. The untamed fabric creates a disorderly physical space; this also pulls from her mental space, which is needed to perform her activities and maintain her appearance. Kaitlin, therefore, chooses clothes that cause the least amount of struggle, which ends up limiting her clothing options.

Gianna on the other hand is satisfied and moreover receives joy from the design of her clothing. Her clothes feel good against her skin and allow her to move freely. Her sports bra

matches her leggings, making her feel stylish and trendy. With product design that works well for her body, she can focus on the fashionable aspects of her clothing. In a sense, it is not the clothing that fits her body, but her body fitting the clothes. However, Gianna's fight with clothing still exists in an alternate form. Instead of being physically trapped by material, she is caught in an unspoken trap to stay compliant with fashion trends in order to maintain her cultural capital. "I feel like it's good to be trendy, you know, it just kind of stands out" (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles).

Gianna often mentions the need to get approval from friends before she wears something in public to make sure it looks good and chooses clothes based on what others are wearing.

> I don't like to wear [jeans], but I have them in my closet. So I wear them occasionally. I mean, jeans can be worn, like, every day, but it's not comfortable for me. Dinner time is faster. Get it over with. Go home and then change. (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles)

The agitation and restlessness that are palpable in this statement exemplify Ahmed's argument that happiness (and conversely unhappiness) is an effect of orientation to an object. Ahmed says that objects have the ability to 'move' human experiences through proximity (Ahmed, 2010). Gianna's physically tight and constricting pair of jeans in proximity to dinner creates a negative association with the occasion in general. These women feel trapped inside the physical and/or social constraints of their clothing, struggling with the physical, social, and emotional influences of the fabric that is their second skin.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated my participants' desires to produce a space of comfort though their clothing and emancipate themselves from spaces of discomfort, a discomfort that stems from feeling stuck within a particular habitus. If they cannot break out of their pre-determined habitus, then Nell, Kaitlin, and Gianna must create a bubble of spatial comfort within it. This space is one of emotional and physical comfort, with distinctions outlined in the chart below:

Space of Physical Comfort	Space of Emotional Comfort
Referring to tangible feelings on the body produced by clothing material. *Associated words*: stretchy, loose, cozy, proper fit, non-constricting.	Referring to emotions within the body experienced as a result of clothing. *Associated words*: confident, secure, worry-free, appropriate, powerful.

The desired space is one where my participants can take control over their bodily feel-states and produce a semblance of order in a world that is much out of their control. In this context, clothing is a form of cultural capital that women can exchange to create spaces of power, confidence, and security.

Chapter 2 - Communal Comfort

In the past decade, there has been much attention paid to the importance of building community. With an increase in studies[10] on the impacts of the pandemic on the emerging generation, there is public concern about the effects of isolation on mental health. Generation Z has been labeled the loneliest generation to date (IFS, 2022) primarily due to in-person disconnection from a digitized world. Community has become a buzzword in the marketing industry, with companies striving to create communities of brand evangelists centered around their brand. But what is meant by community? Scholars in community psychology define it as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan 1986, p.22). In other words, it is a mechanism to achieve the emotional comfort of human connection and support.

My friend recently told me a story about when she wore a Lund University sweatshirt in Washington D.C., she had two people come up to her and comment on it. The first was from Sweden and recognized the university name, and the second had attended the university. The sweatshirt provided mutual context and tacit consent or reasoning to stop a stranger in a bustling city. Through the connection expressed by clothing, these strangers recognized the other as a member of their 'tribe' if you will, and felt comfortable to open conversation. From Scottish kilts to Indian saris to Japanese kimonos, clothing across borders and time periods has acted as a visual signifier of membership to a specific community. There have been many academic texts and theses[11] that discuss clothing as a communication tool that transcends the physical and symbolizes identity, values, customs, and community association. For the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in exploring the latter and uncovering how my participants use clothing to seek and find solace by identifying with a subcultural community. In the pages to follow, I will show how comfort is translated to feelings of belonging, what I define as **communal comfort**.

---

[10] See this 2022 McKinsey report on mental and behavioral health changes for Gen Z.
[11] For further reading, I suggest starting with Rebecca Holman's paper on Clothing as a Communication Tool.

<u>Identity as a Runner</u>

One of my participants, Maria, spoke to us about her newly developed running journey. She and her partner started training for races over the pandemic and ran their first marathon last year. To help with motivation and consistency, they joined a running club that meets every weekend, and they now run races together. When showing her favorite pieces in her wardrobe, Maria often mentioned the running club, sharing that a certain member of the club recommended a pair of shorts, or that she likes to wear a certain tank top to club meetups. Since joining the running club, she started to think about her workouts in a new light, which made her think about her workout clothes in a new light as well. "[With running] it's very clear to make goals and, you know, have something really specific that I'm working towards. I'd say definitely that buying workout clothes is more of a reward now" (Interview, August 2022, New York).

After completing a race or hitting a milestone, Maria now rewards herself with a clothing purchase. Annie Woube describes these consumption treats as a way to transform a woman into a runner (Woube, 2022). The dopamine rush from the new purchase represents more than the excitement associated with retail therapy. Maria is now part of a community and wants to prove this to other members and non-members. Many of the members wear certain outfits and brands that are known for designing product features specifically made for running. However, Maria doesn't purchase these clothing items with the main intention to improve her running pace. It's more about being loyal to her tribe. She states, "Now that I'm in it, I'm *in*. I just feel like now, it's loyalty. I'm like part of the cult, you know, because [there is] a lot of the stuff that comes in, a lot of different colors which I also then have to buy." This is what Woube means when she writes about the power of clothing to create a form of collective fellowship in a community. Not only do the clothes help to identify these females as runners, but members of the run club teach one another about proper athletic gear, demonstrating the passing of shared knowledge that exists in a community.

Maria's actions are also a proof point of Hunt and Miller's study on 'identity talk' (Hunt & Miller, 1997 as cited in Johnson et.al., 2014). After interviewing sorority women about their experiences with using dress, they found there was a set of tacit rules that guided the evaluations of the self and appearance of others. The sorority members would preserve and communicate their membership by adhering to these unspoken rules. Similarly, there are no written rules stating Maria must dress like her running club peers. However, dressing in athletic performance

clothing codifies Maria as a member of the run club and helps shape her new identity as a runner as well. Athletic clothing creates a landscape for shared language and discussion, whether it is about breathable fabric and zipper pockets or breaking the news about a new legging on the market. According to Miller, people exist not just as individuals but as collectives, represented through various objects of consumption (Miller, 2010). An example of this in popular culture is the 'starter pack'[12] meme, which groups subcultural archetypes together through identifiable objects. running collective works to define their group by clothing items that mark their identity.

In addition to conveying membership through dress, the act of purchasing the clothing is a sort of membership ritual. It has become a tradition for Maria and her partner to go shopping after race day and treat themselves to a new piece of running clothing. According to Clifford Geertz, ritual is a way for individuals and communities to order existence, and reinforce this existence in one another (Geertz, 1957). Such rituals are not fully understood by others outside of the communal context. Observers might view Maria and her partner as simply shopping for athletic gear, but they are partaking in the ceremonial activity that solidifies their existence and identities as runners. The entire process of joining the run club, observing common practices, learning about proper clothing, purchasing the clothing, and then teaching this to others is a demonstration of ritual that bonds Maria to the run club as a community and creates unification among the members.

Emotional connection to brand communities

Throughout the interviews, when asked about the reasoning behind choosing certain clothing brands, participants brought up the wish to feel a part of a brand community. Kaitlin shared, "[I wear these] so I feel like I'm part of that inner circle around [redacted brand name]. I think they're really creating like a community around their brand" (Interview, Los Angeles, August 2022). We probed, what does it mean to be part of an inner circle, and what makes the participant choose a specific circle? Kaitlin spoke about the active events that the brand community hosts, and how society associates [redacted brand name] with motivation and courage. She wants to be seen as someone who lifts other athletes up.

In the era of hyper-lifestyle marketing, brands have recognized the importance of narrative storytelling in connecting a brand to a consumer emotionally. During my fieldwork,

---

[12] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/starter-packs

almost all participants supplied emotional reasoning behind choosing particular clothing. A consumer is not buying into a brand, they are buying a lifestyle. Moreover, with a single purchase, a buyer is joining a community of other consumers that embody the physical representation of the brand. In this way, consumers and brands are co-creating the brand and giving it meaning together. Toby Shorin argues that brands are not only creating lifestyles for consumers but also creating culture. "We've seen that we're not only creating culture: we're producing personality in people. In other words, we're creating types of guys" (Shorin 2022). There is a symbiotic relationship between brands and subcultures - as brands associate themselves with specific subcultures, members of these subcultures don themselves in brand gear (i.e., over time Patagonia becomes synonymous with hiker, Thrasher becomes synonymous with skateboarder). Subcultural communities are created and identified through the merging of brands, values, and activity. Members can prove they are part of a subcultural community by branding themselves with specific clothing, which further solidifies the brand association.

Kaitlin tries to align herself with a brand that supports her values of health and achievement, through motivational advertisements and market messaging. However, these brand values and associations are never fixed, but fluid based on the subculture that claims them. Objects of analysis are never fixed but rather exist as an outcome of how they are theorized (Hastrup, 2011, p.434). Just take Pabst Blue Ribbon, the American beer that has become infamously connected to 'hipster' culture in the mid-2010s. Seeking refuge from mainstream marketing, young alternative millennials adopted the beer that originally existed as an inexpensive drink for blue-collar workers. Unlike people, brands are never really stuck or confined by a social habitus. While they can be deeply associated with certain 'types of guys,' this identity can shapeshift with the adoption of a new narrative. Without a team of marketing gurus behind them, it is harder for the everyday individual to break out of socially determined habitus without feeling like an imposter.

Therefore, many of my participants were part of communities that helped to ground them in a societal context and prove their place within it. The members of Maria's run club act as social legitimizers and reassurance that backup her position as a 'runner.' A woman is only a woman to the extent that she performs the prescribed and historical qualities of a woman (Butler, 1988). Likewise, Maria is only a runner to the extent that she looks and acts like other runners. My fieldwork showed me that this is as true for organizations as it is for individuals; consumers

are no longer swayed by brand lip service and want to see brands put their money where their mouth is when it comes to sustainability and inclusivity. Kaitlin states:

> [Redacted brand name] is a brand that actually lives by its brand values. They will keep talking about how they make the clothes sustainably in Vietnam and also show a few of the staff. They say 'this top uses how many water bottles or something like that. I would definitely want to buy it just because of that and be part of the cult. (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles).

There needs to be some visible and actionable 'proof' of values for brands and consumers alike; it is not enough for a brand or a person to verbalize their values, but they must publicly show it. The notion of brands or communities as a 'cult' came up quite frequently in the interviews. After the isolation of the pandemic which prompted a floating sense of personal identity, it seems like all participants were looking to be a part of a community, but furthermore be guided by a leader. Brands perform that cult leadership, with consumer followers under their spell. Wu and Minor compare cult-like brands to extremist religion, remembering the intense devotion of Apple consumers in the early 2000s (Wu & Minor, 2019).

While the run club uniform is less driven by a brand and more by community members, it still possesses the cult-like functionality of recognition and belonging. Beverly Skeggs asks the question, how do we authorize ourselves (Skeggs as cited in Olsson, 2008)? In other words, how does someone claim authority over a particular identity? Associating oneself with a community through clothing is a tool to quickly communicate values and ideology. By dressing herself in sport associative gear that the other run club members wear, Maria is claiming authority as a runner. Her run clothes establish her communal position and help her answer questions about who she is as a distinct and unique individual (Johnson et.al., 2014).

Performing membership within Macro and Micro communities

Micro Communities

While each of my participants fit into the community of North American Women, they are part of other macro and micro communities (large scale and small scale respectively) and subsequently use different ways of dress to feel a sense of belonging in each of them. In this section, I will explain how a few of my participants prove their membership to different communities through clothing. Theoretically, the macro and micro communities can be seen as a

collaboration of assemblages and situated knowledges. Actants within an assemblage are situated within a certain context of knowledge; Rohfling, Rehm, and Goecke's essay on artificial and natural systems argue that situatedness is dependent on context, both global and local (Rehm, Rohlfing et.al., 2003). For example, natives of New York possess tacit knowledge of social protocol that foreign visitors do not. Furthermore, groups of residents within specific neighborhoods possess a higher degree of nuanced knowledge. In the case of my fieldwork, communal membership is conveyed by a physical change of clothing based on the set values of that contextual community.

In the previous section, I explained how Maria purchases athletic gear to signify values of peak athletic performance and devotion to the group. In addition to the run club, Maria is part of a community of social workers at her job that has a different set of values and shared experiences than the run club. Due to the nature of the work, Maria and her colleagues must dress in a subtle manner. "I think that because the population I work with has a wide variety of backgrounds, dressing too formally can sometimes create a power dynamic and different things like that. So, I try to strike a balance of like looking professional, but also like not too formal" (Interview, August 2022, New York). This distinct dress code separates the social workers from the patients, and visually distinguishes the two 'classes.' John Harvey notes clothes' ability to denote power relations immediately and without explanation; "when a hotel manager in a well-cut suit addresses the hotel cleaning staff in their non-descript uniforms, the asymmetrical power relations between the two is palpable" (Harvey, 2010, p. 112).

It is important that Maria convey her position as a part of the staff not only to fit in, but also for safety purposes. As a social worker, Maria often encounters individuals with mental instabilities. Therefore, she makes sure that her outfit remains as neutral as possible, not wearing any jewelry or revealing clothing that could catalyze comments about her person. Dressing in similar modest outfits further emphasizes the unity of the staff community, which will protect her and ensure her safety if a patient becomes unruly. Here, safety and unity act as a form of cultural capital for the staff members and exemplify the unveiling of social processes (Bourdieu, 1990). Patients show up to the center as individuals, without a community present; even though Maria and her staff are there to serve the patients, their uniform dress is a reminder of the true power and privilege dynamics at play (with the staff holding the upper hand.)

Other participants I spoke to represent their membership to micro communities through color and labeling. One woman shared, "I'm a native NY'er and I guess that shows in my mostly all-black attire" (Online community, August 2022). Color is an actant that connects communities. While not *every* New Yorker subscribes to an all-black color scheme, it is accepted by the broader public as an assumption of the dress code. I am unsure if this participant actually prefers wearing black, or if she is playing into societal expectations (what came first, the chicken or the egg?) As an outsider who moved to Scandinavia, I can typically tell the Swedes from the Danes through their usage of color (neutrals versus pastels). Color, or lack thereof, is an indicator to point out members of a community but also to assess who should be excluded. Clothing choice here becomes less of a matter of stylistic preferences and more of a motivation to find a form of happiness delivered through communal belonging (Ahmed, 2010).

Macro Communities

On a larger scale, all women I spoke to are part of a macro community of North American females, and on an even wider scale, belong to the macro community of social media. The nuances of each participant's micro interests and locales exist within a backdrop of macro ideology and values. Although my participants varied in demographics, there was a consistency among their values to strive for progress or even perfection, exhibited by the quotes below.

- My body is my temple, and I'm going to be in it for the rest of my life.
- The most important thing for me in my life is to live my life to the fullest and not have too many regrets at the end of this journey.
- What's most important to me in my life is achieving my goals and getting 1% better every day.

(Online community, August 2022)

There are almost impossible standards of perfection placed upon North American women in the era of peak performance gear and optimization. Jia Tolentino's article on the *Tyranny of the Ideal Woman* describes the perils of this casual perfection mindset societally placed on women, specifically exemplified by athleisure clothing. Tolentino states, "This is how athleisure has carved out the space between exercise apparel and fashion: the former category optimizes your performance, the latter optimizes your appearance, and athleisure does both simultaneously" (Tolentino, 2019). Values of the 'optimal woman' are pushed through the continual production

of tracking gadgets, language in the workplace, and brand messaging, which are in turn reinforced through social media. Similar to the way the business economy has turned enthusiasm into a commodity (Salamon, 2005), it has equally turned wellness and productivity into commodities, promoted consciously by brands and unconsciously by the everyday woman on social media. One of my informants states:

> I feel like just on social media, like the outfit of the day, even for a workout, has just blown up. And so now I'm like normally I would workout like back in the day, in an old fraternity t-shirt or like a t-shirt from the beach or something. But now I'm like, okay, do the colors go together? Like, is it cropped in an okay amount? (Interview, Vancouver, August 2022)

Even without actively joining or engaging, women are automatically a part of a digital community of creators that dictates how they *should* live their lives. Workout clothes are no longer about working out - the activity takes a backseat to the pressures of what is trending on social media, which exists as an ever-present actant living in the background of everything. Miller argues that the objects people use produce an underlying and often unconscious culture, giving individuals a second nature, which is habitually done without thought (Miller, 2010). To take this a step further, I would argue the same is true for intangibles such as social media. Without a real 'off' button, social media is a constant presence that influences women's thoughts, ideas, and actions, seeping into their clothing choices.

Furthermore, social media provides access to a global community of women that creates constant visibility into what others are doing. While this access can enhance an individual's ability to feel connected to a larger community[13], it also creates an overwhelming landscape of comparison. Jane Bennett describes the agency of an electricity grid, and its ability to cause a blackout and pause of normal activity across an entire U.S. region (Bennett, 2010). Like the electric grid, social media holds power over human actions by actively influencing cultural norms. While it does not dictate the exact course of action, it provides certain confines to fit into. For example, when picking out workout gear the participant above checks that her outfit fits the mold of the outfits she sees from her online community. Physical comfort and casualness are overpowered by her desire to seek communal comfort, or her will to belong and stay on trend.

---

[13] For further reading on the advantages and disadvantages of social media in building female communities, I recommend Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword for the Feminist Movement.

On the flip side, some participants exhibited a backlash and rebellion to the influence of the rising community of females on Instagram and TikTok that stress fitness fashion at the gym. One participant, Celine, expresses frustration with the way fashionable workout clothes have impacted the activity of working out. She states:

> A lot of times people don't seem like they're actually there to work out. Like sometimes they're just there to find a date or something and it just kind of interrupts my workout. So I started doing more at home stuff. I felt, like, ugly in comparison or like kind of I wasn't putting effort into my look, but it's because I wasn't trying to. I was trying to work out. (Interview, Los Angeles, August 2022)

Even though Celine chooses not to follow the rules of fashion fitness, she is directly influenced by the women who do. Trending fashion fitness translates into her peers' ideas of what it means to go to the gym and causes her to feel discouraged about the way she was showing up. Whether she chooses to join in or rebel, the macro-communal values presented on social media are difficult for a woman to ignore.

Conclusion

By choosing clothes that signify community membership, or that go against it, these women dress to feel comfortable within the context of their larger and smaller communities. "To be on trend, there is an exhilaration of running with the herd, security of existence, a sense of equal" (Harvey, 2008, p.44). To this I pose a question: are these women running towards the herd out of preference, or are they running for the fear of what would happen if they didn't? In my examples above, habitus is disguised as community - sure Maria may want to be part of the running club, but can she only fit in if she confines herself to the dress code of that particular group? On the outside, modern brands encourage women to be their full selves through messages of inclusivity. Just take Nike's 2023 brand campaign titled "Until We All Win." The brand website proudly boasts that "Nike believes in the power of sport to unite and inspire people to take action in their communities. Equality is not a game. But achieving it will be our greatest victory." With that message in mind, is it even possible for Maria's run club to be united in equality *and* allow for the flexibility of individual clothing choices?

Woube remarks that female athletes become intelligible through their particular appearance, which has been created through the constant repetition of certain aesthetic practices

and expressions (Woube, 2022, p. 5). My fieldwork has shown that as long as the practice of membership involves embodying a particular aesthetic through clothing, women will continue to wear that clothing. Clothing helps to distinguish community, but might simultaneously go against what that community stands for. For example, the exchange of fashion ideas on TikTok has opened possibilities for different ways of dressing to the everyday woman around the globe. At the same time, the platform's 'trending' feature creates a hierarchy among these ideas and guides women to the styles the community deems best. What starts out as creativity and expression on an individual level morphs into homogeny and standardization at a community level.

      This chapter has shown that as much as women may attempt to individualize themselves through clothing, the innate human desire of belonging keeps them confined to dress like the collective. They do this to adhere to the rules of a group identity, but moreover, to belong to a *community*, where they are accepted, supported, and valued. Having a community to lean on is an incredible asset for social mobility, and thus, my participants use clothing as cultural capital to obtain communal status. However, while it is a tactic of social navigation in the short-term, dressing like the pack conversely may have negative effects on habitus in the long-term. Sticking to uniformed brands and gear further codifies the social perception of what a woman runner looks like, potentially leaving out groups of women that do not have access to those clothes. Following social trends provides less room for variation and favors those that have the privilege to financially keep up with changing clothing trends. Evidently, North American women are unconsciously partaking in the exact practices that Bourdieu claims keep structures and systems of habitus.

Chapter 3 – Culturally Appropriate Comfort

In the previous chapter, I showed how my participants fit into specific micro communities and an overarching macro community. The same macro and micro properties exist within culture as well. Culture has several definitions that are broken into narratives; but will be thought of here as the compilation of shared language, values, rituals, and traditions among a group of people. Chapter 2 described the community of North American women as members belonging to the same group. This chapter will expand upon the specific culture of this community and examine the subcultural groups existing under the dominant umbrella. All my participants fit into a demographic somewhere on the larger cultural scale of North American women; for instance, Jen identifies as an Asian American woman and Maria is a Caucasian American. However, each woman I spoke with follows their own cultural norms based on their individual background, family, and experiences. Liu's research on social norms recognizes the culturally bound nature of social norms, stating "Where social norms appear to exist in all human cultures, their form and function vary by group" (Liu, Lapinski et al. 2022). In this chapter, I will show how several of my participants choose clothing to fit into a norm of a culture that is specific to them. I will demonstrate how women seek a level of normative appropriateness or **culturally appropriate comfort** through their clothing choices.

Keeping within cultural bounds

Macro Culture

When speaking of macro culture, I am referring to the dominant global cultural narrative of the specific time, or a web of shared interlocking metaphors or worldviews (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1994). Today's macro culture is heavily influenced by globalization and digitization; the internet has connected people in way that was not possible before and makes it easier to spot overarching patterns. As shown via statements from Nell and Kaitlin, historically identities were very binary. I am an 'Asian American female.' This is where I fit. These are the things I can and cannot do. However, social media apps like TikTok have provided visibility into the everyday woman who more times than not does not fit into the binary mold. This visibility has led to a demand for multicultural and multidimensional representatives in mainstream branding. There are albino models and plus-sized women wearing couture. There are gay women that play the

flute, and heterosexual women that play rugby. Women speak freely about menstrual cycles and difficult pregnancies. Global access to different types of people from unique backgrounds has empowered others to embrace their whole intersectional selves (especially members of Generation Z.)

Encouraging fluid identities creates a blurred line of appropriateness. Though constricting in nature, on the plus side binary identities came with a prescription to follow. It was easier for women to know what behaviors were appropriate, and what actions pushed those boundaries. It seems like many women in my study were searching for the comfort of the prescription. Culturally, messages of boundary-breaking and self-expression are becoming much more mainstream, but my participants were more comfortable sticking to the rules they know. After all, there needs to be a boundary in order to break it. One of my participants talked about the need to wear a top over a bra when she is working out. "I feel like I need to wear [a top] because these shorts are short. So, look here, I'm showing skin. Plus, this kind of like dips down. I just feel like I'm showing a lot more skin with this outfit, so I feel more comfortable wearing it with the top" (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles). As a reflexive confession, initially I'd assumed that age and body type would be the forces driving comfort levels of wearing more revealing clothing (perhaps the prevalence of societal ageism from my previous research section plays a part in this assumption.) However, sentiments like this were commonplace throughout all age groups.

This further strengthens my point of a penetrating habitus; even as macro culture allows for more inclusive identities and body types, many women still act within their habitus. These women are products of cultural practices that have been cultivated over time (Scheer, 2012). Even though options of dress are now seemingly limitless, the historical patriarchal habitus of a woman does not immediately dissipate. American women only began wearing trousers in the 1920s following women's emancipation after the first world war[14]. Habitus is a compilation of language, policies, practices, norms, ideas, and expectations that have brewed up to the present moment. Viewing my participants' clothing choices through the eyes of historical change, it is naive to expect behavior to match up to cultural change. I could see some women reaching to expand their habitus in the way they spoke about clothing and self-expression, but even still, their actions were very much within the confines of it.

---

[14] See here for a general timeline example of women's' oppression through clothing.

Furthermore, from the actor-network theory standpoint, individual expression through clothing is affected by an unlimited number of actants outside of a woman's control. Global markets and affairs alter the ability for free flow of trade. Different fabrics used can constrict and limit physical movement. Silhouettes that are deemed fashionable at a given point in time direct store mannequins (at the time of this writing, it is the 'hourglass figure', which many of my participants reported they try to mimic). Heightened environmental awareness creates purchase-shaming for wearing brands that are non-sustainable practices. Variable pricing and economic recession limits options as well. It seems clothing choice is not as fluid and limitless as the media would have one believe, as women are constrained by a historic habitus and a modern web of actants.

One of my participants, Jen, is a 31-year-old living in New York City of Korean descent who works as a manager in financial operations. Jen, like many other women, leans on her wardrobe as a form of creativity. She states, "It influences my mood by allowing me to feel free and expressing myself with clothes" (Interview, August 2022, New York). At the same time, many of her clothing choices are made to follow the way things 'should' be. She organizes her wardrobe based on category - formal work clothes in one dresser, date nights dresses in another, and so on. I noticed she had a drawer for exercise leggings and another one for casual leggings. I asked what differentiated the types of leggings, assuming it would be a technical feature. "It's still appropriate. It just would feel, inappropriate to wear these while jogging. I think there's a socially accepted outfit for working out versus ones that are not socially accepted" (Interview, August 2022, New York). Her reasoning aligns with Woube's argument that women consume athletic gear on the basis of social conformity rather than technical features (Woube, 2022).

Even though Jen wishes to use her clothes as a form of self-expression, she unconsciously abides by rigid categorization which does not allow for much of an aforementioned creativity. Almost all the women we visited organized their wardrobes in a similar fashion. Through this organization, disparate elements are related and given meaning (Douglas, 1966) - two distinct dresses are evaluated and ordered to become 'formal clothing.' Even though the clothes were categorically separated, each of the women had a miscellaneous drawer of things they tended to reach for the most (i.e., a bra, a favorite dress, silky leggings). This sort of hack around the system in place made me question why these women do not order the entire wardrobe based on the frequency of use instead. The unspoken rules of habitus

manifest through the physical categorization of their clothing into groupings appropriate occasion.

This notion of appropriateness came up in another participant interview with Katherine, a 50-year-old stay-at-home mother living in New York. She states:

> I feel like [this shirt is] appropriate to wear out. And there are some women that wear outfits that I don't know if I could get away with going out in public and having coffee. I mean, some do, but I'm a 50-year-old woman. I feel like this [outfit] is appropriate for being in a Starbucks to being out walking my dog. I don't feel at all uncomfortable. I feel covered. I feel like nothing is too showing. It's appropriate. (Interview, August 2022, New York)

Many of Katherine's clothing choices stemmed from comparison to what other women in her age group wear. Her attitude toward her age shows the societal impacts of gendered ageism, a phenomenon directed against older women that is built on delimited categorizations that ascribe them with a presupposed subordinated position (Krekula et.al., 2018, p.34).

These women aim to dress in a way that makes them feel comfortable acting within the boundaries of what is culturally appropriate. When analyzing the material at first, it was difficult to define the term 'appropriate' as it is so personal to each individual. However, the red thread through each woman's description of appropriateness was very much tied to staying within the lines of social norms in the cultural context in which they live. Their strategic behavior to keep the peace is a sample case for Mary Douglas' theory of dirt and order. Douglas remarks that a culture's ideas and values are tidily ordered by rejecting inappropriate elements (Douglas, 1966). Objects are classified as 'dirty' in one context, but clean in another, based on their relational elements. For example, in most Western settings, a shoe placed in the hall closet is okay, but a shoe placed on the dining room table is dirty because of its proximity to food. This classification demonstrates the Western value of clean eating. By rejecting an outfit that shows more skin, Katherine conveys the societal ideal that older women should cover their bodies. Similarly, by choosing one pair of leggings over another, Jen showcases the societal value of 'dressing the part.' These women are financially independent, successful, eloquent, and seemingly progressive, and yet they are bound by antiquated ideas of cultural appropriateness.

Micro Culture

Underneath the larger scope of macro culture, all of my participants are part of unique micro cultures, coming from different backgrounds with familial norms and expectations. Maria's family culture particularly stuck out as having strong influence over her clothing choices. She states, "I don't know. I feel like it's not appropriate to wear leggings outside of exercise. I was just raised to dress appropriately" (Interview, August 2022 New York). Though it may be appropriate to wear leggings in American macro culture, Maria sticks to her family's definition of appropriate that keeps her in her comfort zone. This comfort zone is part of Maria's personal narrative, which is created in part through memory. The frame of a personal narrative is almost always present, underneath the contextual frames that I've written about in previous chapters.

Fentress and Wickham write about memory as a narrative concept, distinguishing social and personal memory. Narrative social memory is a memory that is collectively shared; it is often told as a story, linking symbols and visual images to remembered meaning. For example, the resurgence of mini-skirts and low-rise jeans evokes a shared childhood memory for millennials, telling the story of the '90s American pop star. However, this type of memory is regularly lost with an environmental or contextual shift - take the low-rise jeans out of America and into Ghana, and the meaning changes. Personal narrative, on the other hand, is less dependent on an external context. "What can be freed from the surrounding context, and remembered on its own, will pass intact from one social context to another" (Fentress, 1992, p. 71). Speaking about her early memories with clothing, one of my informants states, "I used to always wear this pink sweater that my grandmother gave me. I didn't even like it, but it just gave me a warm feeling whenever I wore it, because it reminds me of her" (Interview, August 2022, New York). Certain pieces of clothing evoke comfortable emotions based on cognitive association, having nothing to do with fashion or self-expression. An individual's attachment to memory-evoking possessions grows as they accumulate experiences from their past (Belk, 1988). Thus, my participants seek comfort in the clothing that best aligns with their unique cultural narratives.

John Harvey claims that authors who write about clothes write as if they do not wear clothes themselves (Harvey 2008). To avoid this mistake, I will take the time to reflect on my own cultural memories with clothing. Clothes have always been a sore topic for my mother and

me. My mother grew up the black sheep of her family; raised among four siblings who excelled in academics, she skipped school at the age of 12 to sell tie-dye t-shirts on the corner of her Brooklyn block. At 16, she landed her first job at the Gucci store, convincing customers that scarves laden with pigeon imagery were luxurious. Though her career took a different turn after fashion school, my mother's love for clothes never waned. Clothes to her represent art, status, creativity, and beauty. I, on the other hand, have never shared this sentiment toward fashion and clothing. At the shoe store, nothing felt good, and my scoliosis made the in-style shirts look lopsided. I traded riding boots and skinny jeans for sweatpants and sneakers.

These memories of strained conversations and emotions around clothes shopping have produced a specific narrative that dictates my current relationship with clothing. At the age of 29, I've finally adopted a relationship with clothing that I feel good about; I try to dress for physical ease and convenience, with a few 'standout' pieces here and there for special occasions. I have developed a strong affinity for the monochrome uniform and know which types of fabrics will feel good on my body. Though she still sends me links to fashion shows or the latest jeans every now and then, it seems my mom has also accepted that our view of clothing is different. After conducting this research project, I can't help but question how my own perception of clothing has been shaped by my equally unique cultural narrative.

While I believe my clothing choices accurately express the general laidback, nonchalant energy I try to portray, there are micro and macro cultural forces at play pulling the strings. Like my fellow North American female participants, my body materialism reveals how cultural practices shape what is experienced as natural or real (Bennett, 2016). My choice to adorn looser fitted garments expresses how my muscle and joint condition has manifested into body covering in a society that looks down on the socially and physically disabled. Upon deeper reflection, the darker colors and masculine-leaning silhouettes that I often wear can be seen as a backlash to my traditional Jewish heritage where I am expected to be both married and pregnant by now (both of which I am not.) What was once a fight with my mother in the dressing room became snide remark in the office which morphed into my first experience in Europe; and so it continues. The thousands of mini daily experiences framed by an overarching societal narrative shape my individual relationship to clothing and adds to a collective story. While I will not go as far as to say that I have no control over the outfit I'm wearing as I write this, I will agree with the

Bordieuan idea that the outfit is subject to habitus, the interplay between free will and predetermined power structures (Bourdieu, 1990).

Conclusion

When my participants or I choose a black t-shirt over a pink top, it isn't just the clothing that is changing, it is also culture that is changing, through what Dennett describes as a cultural transmission or evolution. According to their theory, humans act as hosts for culture, and as individuals or a group are oblivious or agnostic about their roles as vectors (Dennett, 2001). This theory can be used to further demonstrate the presence of habitus; humans acting as agents to transmit cultural practices. While we are active agents of clothing choice, we are passive agents of cultural change. My clothing choices, as well as my participants,' provide a personal archive or museum that allows for a reflection on how culture has changed (Belk, 2011). Future museumgoers can look into the archive, pull out an outfit, and wonder what was going through the minds of North American women in the 21st century. While neither myself nor my participants condone homogeny or submitting to peer pressure (they've expressed quite the opposite), you would not know this by our clothing. As much as we encourage creative expression and acting outside the bounds, it can be tiresome to actually live it. To stray too far out of what is culturally appropriate in a macro and micro sense means to potentially be mocked or even mentioned by others.

Clothing becomes capital to simply be, to settle the pot rather than stir, to feel socially comfortable enough to forget about the clothing. The contents of this chapter should not be confused with the term cultural appropriation, where individuals adorn themselves in clothing of an ethnic culture to which they do not belong. I have shown that for my participants and myself, to be culturally appropriate is the exact opposite; it is to fit in and comply to the habitus that we live in. To bring in Skeggs' (Skeggs, 2004) more flexible viewpoint on habitus, the conditions are not always so rigid - on occasion I choose tight-fitting clothing, as I'm sure Jen may go with the 'wrong' pair of leggings and Katherine might choose a low-cute blouse, and we begin to stretch habitus. However, it is far easier to choose clothing that feels culturally appropriate and by default keeps habitus in check.

Chapter 4 - True Comfort

Something that came up quite often in my fieldwork was the concept of 'true self.' An intangible concept to define, when probed on what they meant by this, my participants mentioned feelings of freedom, relaxation, and low stress. Women felt most available to truly be themselves at home, where comfort became more physical and less emotional. Discussions of comfort moved from feelings of confidence to the softness and looseness of a fabric. The coziest clothing was saved to be worn in private, only seen by a roommate or partner. Alternatively, many women spoke about the need to be true to a specific identity. In the following chapter, I give three scenarios where women talk about what they deem to be their true self. I will explore what it means for women to dress true to different versions of themselves, and how they seek what I call **true comfort.** After being placed in a specific macro and even micro habitus,' these women seek a space where they don't have to follow the rules.

<u>Where can you be true to yourself?</u>

There are specific settings in which my participants felt permission to let out their true-selves – home with a partner, with their closest friends, and most prominently, home by themselves. This fact infers that these women embodied some other version of themselves in various other settings. Donna Haraway embraces 'the split and contradictory self" because its multiplicity allows one to deconstruct rigid positions (Haraway, 1988). An example of this split self can be seen in contradictory statements below by one of my participants, Raquelle.

Statement 1: I strength train, walk, run, and spin to stay active. I choose to walk and run because I love being outside, seeing all the Chicago sights, and making the most out of the gorgeous weather we only get for part of the year. I usually feel clear and almost serene while doing these activities, even though they can be taxing, but when I'm done I feel accomplished and am a happy kind of tired. I tend to feel badass/like a boss while strength training. (Interview, Chicago, August 2022)

Statement 2: I don't want to show all my like rolls and everything. And it's just going to be like everything out on display and we just don't need the gym to look at me. If I notice people are looking, then I leave the gym. (Interview, Chicago, August 2022)

In statement 1, Raquelle identifies as someone who is 'strong' or a 'badass' when working out. However, in statement 2, her value of strength training and doing something good for health is deprioritized by the public's perception of her. Shalom Schwartz states that values are transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles for our behavior and shape our identities (Shwartz, 1992 cited in Hitlin, 2003, p.121). Raquelle's behavior raises the point that while internal values and beliefs may be transsituational, their order of importance can be quickly changed depending on the audience.

This is where Erving Goffman's theory of social performance comes into play. In his book *The Presentation of the Everyday Self,* Goffman describes all social interaction as a performance, where the individual plays a part in order to create a specific impression of themselves for the observer (Goffman, 1959). These places of social performance are separated into a front and backstage; the front stage is an occasion where one's professional, proper self is performed, and the backstage is a place where the impression of the front stage is contradicted. For Raquelle, the gym represents a front stage where she is expected to look and act a certain way to convince the other gym-goers that she belongs there. In her interview, she mentions the need to look 'put-together' in public. If Raquelle physically appears 'slobby' with the imperfect parts of her body out on display, it is less plausible for the other gym-goers to believe in her 'put-together' performance.

In her online community excerpts, Raquelle tells us that she feels most comfortable being herself when working out in the comfort of her own home. In this backstage setting, she can wear whatever she wants without an audience present. Here Raquelle's performance of a 'front stage' affects her ability to act in accordance with her values of health, wellness, and strength. Her behavior can also be seen through the lens of Michel Foucault's 'panopticon,' or a way that power is exercised through a permanent visibility (Foucault, 1977). Though she may not directly see the person, there is potential that another gym member is watching her. The feeling of a gaze cannot come from nowhere, but comes from marked bodies and positions (Haraway, 1988); to be more specific, Raquelle is affected by the ephemeral and omnipresent male gaze. In her work on female sport and exercise, Amy Clark demonstrates how the male gaze contributes to women's embodied experiences at the gym. Her study exemplifies that women learn and perform gendered strategies that inform the social context, time, and space in which these experiences occur (Clark, 2017). As such, Raquelle indicates the gendered behavior that is expected of a North American

woman in the gym in 2022. It is difficult to obtain her desired feelings of accomplishment and serenity when placed under the male gaze and the behavioral expectations that come with it. It seems that Raquelle cannot embody her true self at the gym but can only feel that sense of empowerment and strength from exercising in spaces where the gaze is not present.

True to life stage

While women were unable to feel fully comfortable to let their true selves out in spaces where an external gaze was present, they often enacted the self they ought to be. There is increasing societal pressure on women to follow proper behaviors of their life stage, to make sure they are 'keeping up' with their peers. There is a shared understanding among generations where they should be in life; for example, Gen Z should be thinking about college, Millennials should be aware of their biological clock, Gen X should have financial assets, and so on. This is exemplified by one of my favorite social media genres dedicated to #adulting, or accounts that poke fun at the relatable feeling of falling behind in becoming an adult. Covid19 created an unexpected wrench in this trajectory for many women. My participants tended to conflate descriptions of themselves to align with the societal expectations of their life-stage. Though different from the freedom adjacent comfort associated with the true self, there was a comfort that came along with being true to a life stage. In this section I will show how Raquelle and Carla, two women in different life stages, seek comfort during Covid19 through their clothing choices.

Raquelle is a 32-year-old Caucasian woman from Chicago who works for a high-paced pharmaceutical agency. While her wardrobe is vast, the pieces she points out as her favorite consists of ready-made jumpsuits and matching sets. She gravitates toward clothing that reduces decision-making and makes it easier to get ready. "To have something that already comes together all matched, I don't have to think about finding a top and a bottom that come together. Now, it's all together" (Interview, August 2022, Chicago). Like many other Americans during the pandemic, Raquelle worked from home and lines between work and life became blurred. She wore leggings or pajama pants while on Zoom calls and worked from her bedroom. With her bed as her office and no physical separation between work and home, she often pulled 14 hours days.

By the time Covid19 restrictions let up it had been over a year, and Raquelle was exhausted. When purchasing new pieces for her wardrobe, she turned to options that lessened

cognitive load. Jumpsuits and sets allowed Raquelle to appear 'put-together' while putting in the least amount of effort. John Harvey states, "Clothes may be metaphors of our feelings, but they may also be wishful hopes of the way others see us" (Harvey 2008, p.9). As an employee in a client-facing industry, Raquelle wants to be seen as a woman who is taken seriously, someone that is confident, clean, and neat. The pandemic acts as what Douglas would call a cultural anomaly - something that stands outside social norms and produces feelings of unease and anxiety (Douglas, 1966). This anomaly has made it difficult for Raquelle and others like her to know how to dress when returning to the office and social settings.
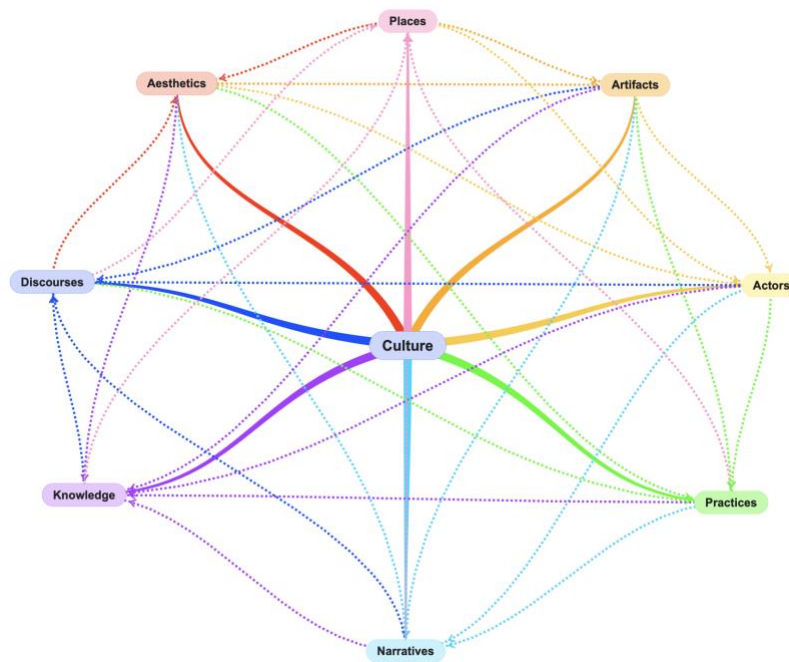
This scenario suggests that women like Raquelle rely on a group to understand how to express their identities externally. A complete lack of external gaze is refreshing for Raquelle, as there are no expectations; comfort in this instance is synonymous with the permission to let out the true self. However, as soon as an external gaze enters the picture (in this case, clients, and coworkers on Zoom), Raquelle becomes aware of expectations for someone in her life-stage. Comfort here becomes synonymous with acceptance, and once again the notion of appropriateness. In public facing settings, Raquelle must gain approval of others in a similar life-stage that wish to identify as a young female professional. Her clothing choices are motivated by convenience and acceptance versus creativity, so she can effortlessly appear like a young female professional.

The clothing response to pandemic pressures manifests in an opposite way in one of my other informants, Carla, a 19-year-old Asian-American student from Chicago. During the pandemic, she was stuck attending online lectures at home as a freshman in college, a pivotal time for independent growth. Away from her peers, she had taken an interest in fashion and found creativity through her clothing. "I like putting outfits together; I really like flared pants lately." To stand out in a sea of Zoom students, many of whom she had not even met, Carla uses clothing to appear fun, creative, and interesting. She finds joy and excitement through color, as she says, "Especially green is my favorite color and I like this little detail here. I think it gives it a little more pizzazz and kind of like takes a little bit up from an ordinary t shirt. And I mix and match different colored pants with it. I like to make my clothes work hard for me" (Interview, August 2022, Chicago).

While they have opposite attitudes towards clothing, the statements from Carla and Raquelle are similar in that they both rely on their clothes to 'work for them' to embody the

person they wish to be seen as. The demands they place on their clothes are quite high; their clothes should help them (1.) meet their current internal emotional needs (2.) help them look the way they'd like to be externally presented (3.) while simultaneously ensuring that they are properly fitting into expectations of a woman in their life stage. Raquelle's pandemic exhaustion has produced a lack of effort, yet she must appear that she is trying. "I feel the most myself when I'm just lounging around my house in sweatpants. Like I don't have to try" (Interview, August 2022, Chicago). Raquelle expects her everyday clothes to give her that same physical and emotional relaxed feeling of lounging, while appearing presentable, but not too professional so that she is still stylish. Carla expects her clothes to make her feel glamorous and independent, while being loose and mobile, and keeping her on trend with her peers. She states, "When I go out, I want to get the kind of glamour of the outfit, but also like I need to feel comfortable and move around."

The pressure that Carla and Raquelle put on their clothing to facilitate the ability to embody their true selves and the selves they are expected to be is exemplary of Jane Bennett's 'thing power' and notion of assemblages. Bennett argues that humans and 'things' work together to give shape to a state of being; an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces" (Bennett, 2010, p.22). My participants speak as though their clothes alone have the power to bring out certain versions of self, yet clothes are just one actant in an interwoven network of actants that make up a cultural experience. Toby Shorin reflects on the relational elements that are in endless interaction and create 'components of culture,' (visualized in the model on the following page):

The model exhibits Bennett's assemblage, or swarm of vibrant matter, where actants work together but also compete with each other. Clothing in this model can be seen as a material artifact, constantly interacting in space with a platitude of actants that I spoke about in Chapter 1 (societal narratives, aesthetic beauty standards, cultural practices, etc.) However, where I would change the model is the visually equal weight in which each component influences culture. Depending on the moment in space and time, different actants carry more power than others. Carla and Raquelle make their clothes work for them, but it must be recognized that they are in a unique cultural context of Covid19. Without the influence of the global pandemic, their emotional and physical needs, projected hopes, and generational life stage might be different. Thus, the clothing that would facilitate comfort is heavily dependent on cultural context.

<u>True to the part</u>

In this last section, I will analyze how women utilize clothing to be true to the specific role they are playing. I'd like to come back to Russell Belk's *Possessions of the Self*, that describes clothes as an extension of the self. Belk argues that in claiming that something is

'mine,' we also come to believe that the object is 'me'" (Belk, 1988, p.141). My participant, Kaitlin, made it known that in order to *be* something, she must look the part.

> If I go to the gym, I would want to feel like an athlete. So I feel like, okay, you [need to] look like an athlete. I wear clothes based on the role that I will do. If I do art, I will definitely wear something like this because it's loose. It makes me feel like I'm an artist. Um, however, if I go to the gym, I would want to feel like an athlete. So I want to feel like, okay, you look like an athlete. Be one, do it. Yeah. (Interview, August 2022, Los Angeles)

Over the two past decades, American brands have been encouraging creative freedom, individuality, and consumer input. The disruptive underwear brand, Parade, frequently crowdsources color names from their Instagram followers. MAC wants women to celebrate their 'heart, style, and soul' in a campaign that has consumers submit their own definitions of beauty. GAP's global head of marketing calls their most recent campaign "a reflection of individuals shaping culture by embracing their own paths—not what has been historically or traditionally defined for them, but what they define to be true for themselves" (Lim, 2022). However, women like Kaitlin are still carrying the belief that to be a true version of themselves (i.e., an artist), they must dress true to this role.

This can be attributed to the disparity between slow and fast culture. Due to today's rapid speed of information sharing, language and ideas are evolving at the quickest speed in history[15]. For example, the body positivity movement focused on celebrating women's bodies and appearance has already begun to shift towards body neutrality, which encourages body acceptance and a focus on its function rather than its appearance. Nicole Barile, intercultural business leader, speaks about the importance of designating between slow and fast culture. Fast culture is characterized by globalization and technology, while slow culture is about deep values and long-haul ideas (Barile, 2019). Therefore, fast culture values and messages of acceptance, inclusivity, fluidity, and expression are bubbling atop the core beliefs of distinctive roles and 'looking the part' of slow culture.

In both fast and slow culture, there is an association with the true self as an inner notion, something that is found from within, and separate from the external self. This is seen in ancient religion, placing emphasis on the separation from external body and internal soul. Scheer puts

---

[15] For more information on the evolution of language, see here.

this nicely, stating, "the 'interior' as the locus of 'true feelings' and the self is also a product of a habitus that engages in denigrating the 'exterior' and 'emancipating' the subject from it (Scheer, 2012, p.206)." It is ironic then that many of my participants speak as though the external appearance is indicative of their internal selves. Nell states, "You don't want to look like a slob, or you don't want to look frumpy where your shirt's all stretched out and like, you don't put any effort. You don't want them to think you don't care" (Interview, August 2022, New York). If she dresses like a woman who doesn't care, outsiders will believe that she *is* a woman who doesn't care.

This proves the power that clothing has on self-perception. An experiment (Tiggemann & Andrew 2012, cited in Johnson et.al. 2014, p.5) studying the effects of clothing on self-perception revealed that even thinking about certain types of clothing, for example a bathing suit versus a sweater, resulted in women feeling higher negativity towards their bodies. The step of performance becomes less necessary when it comes to self-perception; by donning a pair of clothes it is almost as if women can internally shapeshift through different versions of the self instantaneously. Perhaps, however, social performance has become so engrained in these women's lives that the anticipated judgement of an external audience seeps into ideas of self-perception. Wearing a loose dress and scarf, Kaitlin can think of herself as an artist. I question if she would feel the need to dress the part if no one was looking, or if public expectations have created an overwhelming power for clothing to dictate what a 'true' artist looks like.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, many of the participants claimed that their true self comes out in private. While defining true-self is a feat beyond the scope of this thesis, I can conclude from the above analysis that what my participants perceive as being their true-self is actually the feeling of true comfort, where they can release expectations of society. In private, they don't have to follow the outline of their life stage or the script of a certain social role. The comfort they seek to truly be themselves is permission to step out of their societal role, and the clothing associated with this role. It makes sense then why my participants reach for loungewear, looser garments, and older worn clothing when seeking a space of true comfort at home. In private, the agency of clothing is lessened as it becomes a secondary thought, and one can finally separate the 'mine' from the 'me' (Belk, 1988).

This chapter has shown the definition of true comfort changes when a public gaze is introduced. With an external gaze, my participants achieve true comfort by convincing others of their role or life-stage through clothing. Without the gaze, true comfort is achieved by letting go and releasing the self that must be kept away in public. This can be explained by the objectification theory, which states that "an objectifying gaze evokes an objectified state of consciousness which influences self-perceptions" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, cited in Johnson et.al. 2014, p.3). The true-self in spaces of objectification is limited – my participants can express how they want to come across and use clothing as capital to manipulate how others perceive their true self. However, revealing their whole self is confined by the structural habitus in which they live; the habitus that dictates the unspoken guidelines of being a woman in North America. Though this habitus does not disappear in private, the awareness of it might.

When my participants speak of expressing their true self in public spaces, they are referring to an identified self that is dependent on cultural context and is very much determined by habitus. Women change their behavior to appease an external gaze, avoiding certain articles of clothing or spaces all together. Kaitlin demonstrated that finding true comfort is less about inner expression and more about fitting into the role she is performing at a given time. Carla and Raquelle's clothing responses to Covid19 show that true comfort is very much dependent on a contextual and relational network of actants. Thus, comfort is found when they can most closely match their clothing to the identity, they wish to embody at a given point in time. Coming back to the Johnson et.al. differentiation of clothing that exhibits the woman she wishes to be versus the woman she actually is; my participants find true comfort in public by wearing clothing that enables them to express the woman they wish to be, and true comfort in private through clothing that allows them to be the women they actually are.

Concluding Discussion

Throughout the writing of this text, I imagined a woman wrapped inside a plastic saran wrap. In an effort to escape the plastic, she stretches it, twists, and pulls in different directions and shapes. She makes progress, but ultimately ends up stuck and back where she started. In the chapters above, I have demonstrated how clothing acts as a physical manifestation of socio-cultural practices that keep North American women in a habitual loop.

Comfort as a form of cultural capital

This cultural analysis has shown that the everyday practice of a North American woman wearing clothes is far more profound than meets the eye. Clothes are a powerful tool that women can use to create semi-controlled conditions and help them reach desired states of being. A North American woman asks so much of her clothing. Like the impossible standards of societal habitus, she places these impossible standards onto their clothing. She wants to feel put together without effort; her truest self without straying from the norm; part of a community but a unique individual; appropriate but not a stereotype. All the women I spoke to were incredibly smart and inspiring. Some were wide-eyed students with a bright future ahead of them, others were seasoned professionals or caring mothers. They were passionate and intellectual, creative, and determined. Despite their demographic differences, it seemed like it was difficult to articulate their attitudes and feelings toward clothing. The term 'comfort' was used synonymously for feelings of safety, belonging, appropriateness, confidence, relaxation, etc. While the definition of comfort changed based on the contextual frame, all types of comfort explored in this thesis (communal, spatial, cultural, and true) can be explained as an emotional response to following the rules of habitus.

The experience of comfort for these women changes based on how it can be exchanged for cultural capital. In traditional terms, cultural capital is thought of as assets like education, knowledge, and social background that aid an individual in gaining status (Bourdieu, 1990). My thesis expands the definition of cultural capital to include comfort as a societal asset. In my analysis, comfort has been re-understood as a tool to for my participants to navigate their pre-determined habitus. Producing spaces and conditions of physical and emotional comfort creates greater possibility for their social mobility. Skeggs argues that cultural capital is not a matter of just obtaining objects and knowing how to use them; "what matters is how they are

conceptualized in relation to others" (Skeggs, 2004). Having tacit cultural knowledge that comes from living in a North American society, these women have come to understand how their clothing choices will be interpreted in relation to other actants in their network. Whether these actors are human (i.e., individuals and groups) or nonhuman (i.e., space and gaze), my participants have learned how to use clothing as a strategy to gain the cultural capital of comfort.

By primarily analyzing my participants' effortful search for comfort through their clothing choices, I have secondarily illustrated the social conditions in which they are placed. While each participant's specific habitus differs due to their unique demographics and backgrounds, they all live under the overarching habitus of a North American woman. In observing my participants employ tactics to create comfort, the invisible structures of a habitus become visible. The search for comfort through clothing stems from the innate *discomfort* that is felt in their environment. If comfort is synonymous with power, security, confidence, and equilibrium, then discomfort is synonymous with the opposite: lack of power, danger, insecurity, instability. My participants are caught in a society that is progressive yet regressive, fluid yet regulated. As such, their motivations move back and forth between self-expression and conformity. Empowering messages in media and an external image of women's equality doesn't seem to match the reality of a rocky political[16] landscape.

My participants live these tensions and contradictions and have learned how clothing is an influential actant in navigating them. Their desire to break out of a narrow habitus is there – these women share aspirations of creative expression, defying racial stereotypes, and moving past gender norms. However, the need to survive societally is stronger; thus my participants' use clothing strategies that give them comfort and control in the moment, but ultimately keep them within a habitus. Harvey says that "The changing of fashion shows an unwillingness to be kept in a single, standard container" (Harvey 2008, p.87). My participants exhibit an unwillingness to be kept in a container with defined rules of dress, but the tactics they use to move within society maintains their place within it.
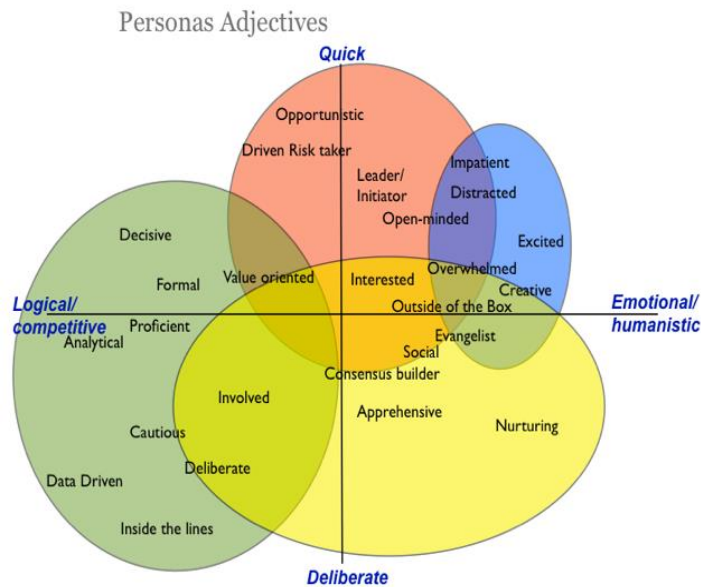
---

[16] A thorough outline of the political landscape is outside my scope, however for brief references include the overturn of Roe v. Wade, Florida's Don't Say Gay bill, and sexual allegations of the nation's former President.

Applicability and Further Research

This thesis can be used to enhance ethnographic practices across industries and promote a deeper analysis of language usage. As we have seen, there is not just one meaning of the word 'comfort,' just like there is not one definition of the word 'versatility' or 'support'. This text serves as an example case to champion critical distance in cultural research and to apply a naive lens to participant responses. I will concentrate further applicability of my analysis on what it means for consumer insights and brands, as a homage to the origin of this study.

As a previous employee working within brand marketing, I know that marketers often use the buyer persona method when building the results of an ethnographic study. As evident by the original brand study, companies are becoming more attuned to the power of an individual's specific assemblage of environmental actants in influencing purchasing decisions. The material they gather from ethnography is translated into a buyer persona that creates a customer voice and puts power into the hands of the consumer. These personas are a way to bring a buyer to life, creating sample profiles (i.e., 'the athlete,' 'the mother') to help tell a consumer story. Market researchers Smith and Wintrob use brand storytelling as a framework for activating consumer engagement. They claim that "stories tend to follow four primary constructs: heritage, contemporary, folklore, and vision" (Smith & Wintrob, 2013, p.38). I agree with the breakdown of these primaries, however, the text is missing the point where these different stories can converge. Especially if this framework is to be applied to consumer stories, the separation of story types into neat boxes neglects those fluid, more multi-faceted stories.

This siloed framework bleeds into the way buyer-personas are constructed, often seen in lifestyle marketing. An Indian study in consumer behavior and lifestyle marketing argues that lifestyle aspects such as personality, social class, and interests give a more comprehensive consumer profile than just demographics (Chidambaram, 2012). It is true that an individual's lifestyle can correlate with consistency of certain behaviors, however, it seems that this is quite a harsh and rigid approach to studying consumers. Take the graphic on the following page, which maps out four buyer personas (quick, emotional, logical, deliberate) based on purchase behavior characteristics.

56

Personas Adjectives

Quick

Opportunistic

Driven Risk taker

Impatient

Distracted

Leader/
Initiator

Open-minded

Excited

Decisive

*Logical/
competitive*

Formal

Value oriented

Interested

Overwhelmed

Creative

Outside of the Box

*Emotional/
humanistic*

Proficient

Analytical

Evangelist

Social

Consensus builder

Involved

Apprehensive

Nurturing

Cautious

Deliberate

Data Driven

Inside the lines

Deliberate

Content Marketing Institute, 2019, Aaron Agius <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/articles/method-buyer-personas/>

This thesis emphasizes that purchase drivers cannot be as perfectly divided as they are above. Patterns in ethnographic material can indicate consumer behavior, but to push the material further brand researchers should combine social theory and history to connect to individual stories. It is vital to understand the deeper needs that women are seeking from their clothing to properly create a product and market to them. As such, I believe there is an opportunity for market researchers to challenge the status quo of how qualitative consumer research is used for brand marketing strategy.

It seems like female-targeted fashion brands today are selling the story of an inclusivity, individuality, and female empowerment. As this thesis has shown, the story of a North American woman is extraordinarily nuanced based on contextual frame. Marketing is always based off of a narrative, so why shouldn't brands be open about these struggles and tell the story of the 'everyday woman?' The influence that brands and companies have on driving culture cannot be understated. Brands have fostered virtual and in-person communities for their customers to increase loyalty and engagement, creating online discussion spaces, events, and global fan networks. Toby Shorin reflects on the enmeshed relationship between culture and product, and the resulting responsibility of brands and marketers to produce a type of culture they want to be a

part of. He asks the thought-provoking questions "what types of culture is worth creating?" and "what types of people do we want to become" (Shorin, 2022)?

It would be beneficial for brands, consumers, and culture alike if market research was more attuned to in-depth consumer narratives. It might be challenging for a clothing brand to create an outfit that makes Raquelle feel so confident in public that she re-thinks her decision to leave the gym. But perhaps by highlighting an awareness of the contradictory challenges that women face, they can take steps towards fostering a greater culture of acceptance. Fashion helps people imagine what comes next; afro-futurism, activism, etc. While it has that power, and it is important to dream and imagine a hopeful future, it is also key to listen to what consumers are saying about culture right now through their search for comfort.

This text draws a conclusion from in-depth analysis of research material through theory, a process that takes time and cannot be rushed. There has traditionally been a broader tension between academia and business in fields of humanities and social science that often stem from the fundamental issue of time. Academic studies can last from a few months to a few years, while corporate market research studies are typically capped based on budget. In cultural analysis, the value of time is not in shrinking it to adhere to deadlines but lies in expanding it to gain more impactful results. Understandably, market research teams are constrained by financial restrictions; however, the topic of time is an important one to continue discussing, especially related to the value of long-term ethnography. Sunderland & Denny reflect upon what researchers are actually doing when conducting market research:

> Markets are not constituted by segments of people with specific and profiled 'needs,' rather they are constituted by systems of interwoven meanings and practices that may or may not have resonance for a product, brand, or experience. (Sunderland & Denny, 2007).

Uncovering these systems of meaning and practices from complex humans is difficult to do on its own, but even more challenging on a three-week timeline.

Further Research

While this text is theorized through practice theory and ANT, it is entrenched in so many other issues that can be expanded on with further research. Ethnologists can build on Bourdieu's

practice theory to examine issues of class and wealth. Elements of performance have been woven throughout the text, however, one can go deeper by adding more theory (i.e., Judith Butler and Erving Goffman) to problematize how wearing clothes is a performative act. Researchers in feminist studies can use the material to further examine what it means to embody a female body in the North American context and explore the history of women's clothing. Academics in cultural studies can expand on Chapter 3 to analyze how comfort is experienced by people of different nationalities. Lastly, researchers can use my application of theory to open a wider discussion of the role of relational agents in human choice.

References

Ahmed, S. (2010). The Affect Theory Reader. Durham & London, Duke University Press.

Ahmad, N. (2015). "The Impact of Social Media on Fashion Industry: Empirical Investigation from Karachiites " Journal of Resources Development and Management **7**.

Barile, N. (2019). "Slow VS. Fast Culture." Nicole Barile https://futureofglobalwork.com/blog/2019/5/16/slow-vs-fast-culture.

Belk, R. W. (1988). "Possessions and the Extended Self." Journal of Consumer Research, 15(2): 139–168.

Bennett, J. (2010). Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, Duke University Press.

Bennett, J. (2016). "The Force of Things." Political Theory 32(3): 347-372.

Beverley Skeggs, L. A. (2005). Feminism After Bourdieu, Wiley-Blackwell.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). The Logic of Practice. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press.

Brands, S. (2022). "Majority of US Consumers Say They Will Pay More for Sustainable Products." from https://sustainablebrands.com/.

Chidambaram, C. (2012). "Consumer Behavior and Lifestyle Marketing." International Journal of Marketing, Financial Services & Management Research 1(10).

Clark, A. (2017). "Exploring Women's Embodied Experiences of 'The Gaze' in a Mix-Gendered UK Gym." Societies 8(1): 2.

Clemens, A. (2018). "What are the disadvantages of user personas in UX design?".

Crane, D. and L. Bovone (2006). "Approaches to material culture: The sociology of fashion and clothing." Poetics 34(6): 319-333.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989(1).

David W. McMillan, D. M. C. (1986). "Sense of community: A definition and theory." Journal of Community Psychology 4(1).

De Boer, T. (2010). Global user research methods. Handbook of Global User Research, Elsevier: 145-201.

Dennett, D. C. (2001). "Evolution of Culture." The Epidemiology of Ideas 84(3).

Douglas, M. (1966). Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo. London, England, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Escalas, J. E. (2004). "Narrative Processing: Building Consumer Connections to Brands." Journal of Consumer Psychology 14(1/2): 168-180.

Flodin, E. (2019). "The Second Skin: A study on the relationship between clothes and human bodies." 73.

Foster, S. (2004). "Colonialism and Gender in the East: Representations of the Harem in the Writings of Women Travellers." Modern Humanities Research Association 34(1): 6-17.

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish : the birth of the prison. New York, Pantheon Books.

Geertz, C. (1957). "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example." American Anthropologist 59(1): 32-54.

Graffman, K. and K. Börjesson (2011). "We are Looking Forward to Some Cool Quotes" Perspectives on Applied Ethnography." 2011 - Special Issue: Irregular Ethnographies 41(1).

Greenleaf, C. (2019). ""Fat People Exercise Too!": Perceptions and Realities of Shopping for Women's Plus-Size Exercise Apparel." Clothing and Textiles Research Journal 38(2).

Haraway, D. (1988). Feminist Studies. New York, Routledge.

Harvey, J. (2008). Clothes, University of Cambridge.

Hastrup, F. (2011). "Shady plantations: Theorizing coastal shelter in Tamil Nadu." Anthropological Theory 11(4): 425-439.

Hitlin, S. (2003). "Values as the Core of Personal Identity: Drawing Links between Two Theories of Self." American Sociological Association 66(Special Issue: Social Identity: Sociological and Social Psychological Perspectives): 118-137.

Hoskins, J. (1998). Biographical Objects, Routledge.

James J. Fentress , C. W. (1992). Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past, Blackwell.

Jane Cunningham, P. R. (2021). Brandsplaining, Penguin Business.

Johnson, K., et al. (2014). "Dress, body and self: research in the social psychology of dress." Fashion and Textiles 1(1).

Kim, Y.-K. and P. Sullivan (2019). "Emotional branding speaks to consumers' heart: the case of fashion brands." Fashion and Textiles 6(1).

Klepek, M. (2019). "Buyer Personas: Its Use and Limitations in Online Marketing." Marketing Identity(1): 11.

Krekula, C., et al. (2018). Multiple Marginalizations Based on Age: Gendered Ageism and Beyond. International Perspectives on Aging, Springer International Publishing: 33-50.

Kusenbach, M. (2003). "Street Phenomenoloogy: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool." Ethnography 455(4).

Landén, A. S. (2011). "From ethnographic 'self'-discovery to processes of identification." Qualitative Research 11(5): 536-551.

Lim, J. (March 8th 2022). "Gap's spring campaign champions individuality and self-expression." The Industry Fashion. 2022, from https://www.theindustry.fashion/gaps-spring-campaign-champions-individuality-and-self-expression/.

Liu, R. W., et al. (2022). "Culture and Social Norms: Development and Application of a Model for Culturally Contextualized Communication Measurement (MC3M)." Frontiers in Communication **6**.

M.Callon (2001). "Actor Network Theory." International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences: 62-66.

Martin, K. A. (1998). "Becoming a Gendered Body: Practices of Preschools." American Sociological Review 63(4): 494-511.

Miller, D. (2010). Stuff. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Molotch, H. (1993). "The space of Lefebvre." Theory and Society 22(6): 887-895.

O'Dell, T. W., Robert (2011). "Composing Ethnography." Ethnologia Europaea 1(41): 27-40.

Olsson, A. (2008). Thinking with Beverley Skeggs. S. Universitet. Stockholm.

Orvar Löfgren, B. E., Richard Wilk (2015). Exploring Everyday Life: Strategies for Ethnography and Cultural Analysis.

Owyong, Y. S. M. (2009). "Clothing semiotics and the social construction of power relations." Social Semiotics 19(2): 191-211.

Pahl, K. Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story.

Patricia L Sunderland, R. M. D. (2007). Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research, Routledge.

Pitcher, L. (2022). Why are Body Types Still a Trend? Nylon Magazine.

Pollard, A. (2020). "Taking Up Space for a Black Woman Is a Revolutionary Act." Rethink Together.

Rehm, M., et al. (2003). "Situatedness: The Interplay between Context(s) and Situation." Journal of Cognition and Culture 3(2): 132-156.

Richard A. Feinberg, L. M., and W. Jeffrey Burroughs (1992). "Clothing and Social Identity."
    Sage Publications 11(1).

Salamon, K. L. G. (2005). Magic, Culture and the New Economy.

Salminen, J. (2020). "Risks and Disadvantages of Using Personas." The Persona Blog
    https://persona.qcri.org/blog/risks-and-disadvantages-of-using-personas/.

Sayani Saha, P. S. (2021). "The impact of social media on fashion industry - A case study on Zara and H
    & M." International Journal of Research, Culture, and Society **5**(12).

Sheer, M. (2012). "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?" History and Theory 51(2): 193-220.

Shorin, T. (2022). "Life After Lifestyle." https://subpixel.space/entries/life-after-lifestyle/ 2023.

Skeggs, B. (1997). Formations of Class and Gender. Nottingham Trent University, Mike
    Featherstone.

Skeggs, B. (2004). "Context and Background: Pierre Bourdieu's Analysis of Class, Gender and
    Sexuality." The Sociological Review 52: 19-33.

Smith, K. and M. Wintrob (2013). "Brand Storytelling: A Framework for Activation." Design
    Management Review 24(1): 36-41.

Tajuddin, F. N. (2018). "Cultural and Social Identity in Clothing Matters "Different Cultures,
    Different Meanings"." European Journal of Behavioral Sciences.

Thrift, N. (2000). "Still Life in Nearly Present Time: The Object of Nature." Body & Society
    6(3-4).

Tichnor, A. (2006). "Suds and Selfhood: Marketing the Modern Woman in the 1920's, 1930's
    and 1940's." College Undergraduate Research Electronic Journal.

Tolentino, J. (2019). Athleisure, barre, and kale: the tyranny of the ideal woman. The Guardian.

Tutton, E. and K. Seers (2003). "An exploration of the concept of comfort." Journal of Clinical
    Nursing 12(5): 689-696.

Udu, K. A. O. (2016). "Unethical Marketing Research Practices in Nigeria: Manipulations in
    Marketing Reports." Journal of Research and Development (JRnD) 2(12).

Wacker, R. M. W. (2008). What's Your Story? Storytelling to Move Markets, Audiences, People,
    and Brands. Upper Sadle River, New Jersey, FT Press.

Woube, A. (2022). "Dressed for success or undermining the achievement? Material culture of
    recreational sporting events for women in Sweden." Sport in Society: 1-13.